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# THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE:

*DISCOURSES UPON HOLY SCRIPTURE.*

BY

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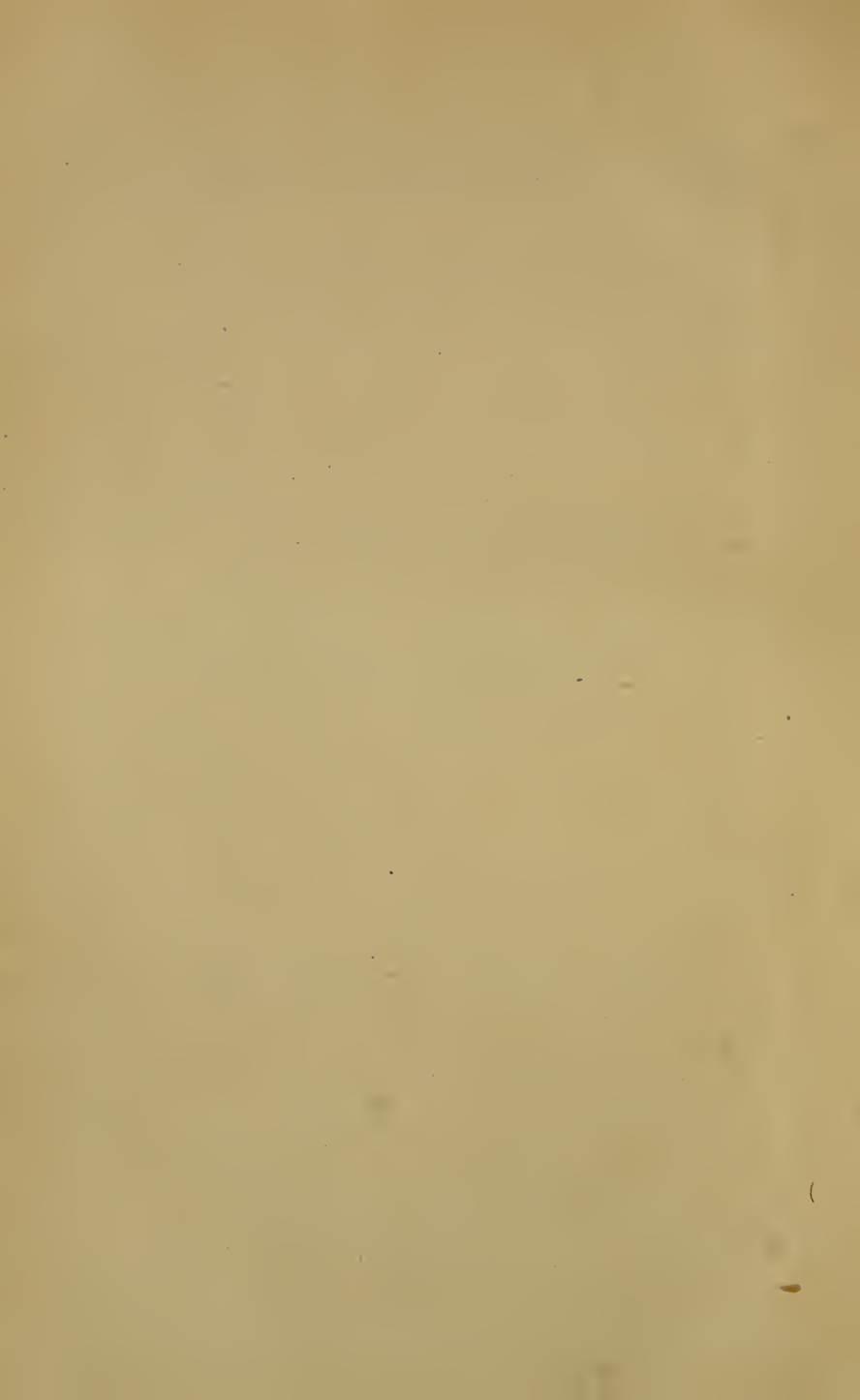
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# THE BOOK OF THE PROPHET ISAIAH

(Continued)

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## Chapter xxvii. 8.

"He stayeth his rough wind in the day of the east wind."

### THE USE OF THE ROUGH WIND.

MANY comforting discourses have been preached from this text. Men eagerly seize consolation, whether it flows from the text, or is imported into it. Why this eager grasping after comfort? Simply because all men need it. Look upon the largest congregation that can assemble, and any wise preacher who has had experience of his work will know that in the crowd that throngs around him are people with broken hearts, or are sensible of disappointment, anxiety, fear, or are apprehensive of coming distress. Hence I have never hesitated to advise the young preacher to remember that the most of his hearers are not geniuses or critics, but needy, pain-struck, and weary souls. He who preaches to that class will always be abreast of the times, will always keep step for step with any progress which civilisation can ever make. Venerable and pastoral preachers have comforted their flocks with this gracious text. They have used it in the sense that God would not send both the east wind and the rough wind at one and the same time—in the sense that God holdeth back the rough wind as a skilled rider might hold back some proud and urgent steed; they have not been slow to quote the words "He tempereth the wind to the shorn lamb," and so full of gracious poetry are these words that many have not hesitated to believe they were in the Bible. All beautiful words are in the Bible, if not literally yet spiritually, suggestively, in all the helpfulness of solace and stimulus. All Indian poetry is

in the Bible. But how gracious and comforting soever the discourses may have been, they have had absolutely no relation to this text. Yet who that knows human nature ever credited human nature with being logical? The thing that was wanted was the comfort. But comfort of the kind which has been indicated is not in this text. All words of wise comfort are true in themselves, but when it becomes a question of direct exposition, our first business is to know what the words originally meant, then if we desire to proceed further, with the consent of our hearers we may bring comfort from the four quarters of heaven, for human life needs it all, so broken is it and so self-helpless.

The word "stayeth" is, in the first instance, a principal word. It is not a common term. We find it, however, in a strange place, even in the book of Proverbs. The fourth and fifth verses of the twenty-fifth chapter of that book will show what is meant—"Take away the dross from the silver, and there shall come forth a vessel for the finer. Take away the wicked from before the king, and his throne shall be established in righteousness." The word that is rendered "stayeth" is rendered in the passage now cited "take away." The literal meaning is that God's rough wind separateth. It is a wind that blows away the chaff, but allows the weighty wheat to remain:—Take away the dross—take away the wicked—take away the chaff. When God sendeth his rough wind it is to sift, it is that after it has done blowing there may be nothing left but the true wheat. God conducts evermore a great separating process in life. The process takes part in the individual life that longs to develop itself truly and wisely and divinely. Man is always losing something in the process of his education, as well as gaining something: God's wind bloweth through and through his character, shaking it, separating part from part,—a great ventilating process goes on, and a wondrous economy of sifting, separation, purification, so that at the last when the wind has sobbed itself to rest there is a man left marked by pureness, health, reality; all that was mean, unworthy, dross-like, wicked, has been blown away, and there now stands a man after God's own heart,



The object of punishment, then, is not destruction. When God sends his rough wind he does not send it as a wind of judgment, for the purpose of destroying men, carrying them tempestuously away into abysses on which the sun never shines. Let us understand the spirit and the purpose of Providence. When God tears a man down, it is to do the man good; when the rough wind comes into a man's estate and uproots the oldest trees, it is to make way for other growths of a kind more approved and more fruitful. If we could grasp this doctrine and commit ourselves to it, then the wind might blow at noonday and at midnight and we should say, The Lord is sifting, separating, taking away the dross, taking away the wicked, taking away the mean, and he will leave behind the pure silver, the true character, the noble soul. God will never destroy anything that has in it virtue, health, reality of value. Then let the great wind blow; let us be thankful for the sifting wind. Many of us would never sift ourselves. We are so blinded that we mistake chaff for wheat in many instances, and we think there is some value even in the dross when we cannot part with pleasures that give the palate even one moment's joy. The whole process of sifting must be done from without. The other processes, however conducted, indicate the same purpose. Wine is emptied from vessel to vessel, not for the purpose of destroying the wine, but for the purpose of purifying it, so that at the last there shall be no dregs, but real wine, fit for the drinking of the angels. All this is often done by the invisible hand of Providence through the visible action of events. What can we do to keep back the process of events? Nothing. We have only a sheet of paper to oppose to the great fires that are coming on. Our fences are wooden; when we oppose them to the fire we add to the conflagration which we meant to extinguish. Better yield ourselves to God, saying to him, Take away whatever is worthless; thou knowest all purposes, the end as the beginning is in thine hand; only at the last may we find that every stroke was delivered in love, every tempest roared in order to prepare the way for a sweet gospel, and every grave was dug only to hide that which was doomed to corruption.

Another rendering has been approved by critics who have

established a claim to confidence. It is poetical rather than grammatical—"He sigheth with his rough wind." The idea is that whilst God is conducting processes of judgment he is sighing compassionately ; he is not grieving the children of men willingly ; his great sighing, sobbing, moaning wind is like the sigh of pity. All such processes are needful. Even this is allowable. It falls into line with all we have known through the medium of reading and experience and consciousness of the method of the divine rule. God is subject to emotion ; that is to say, he is so represented to us, because he allows us to approach him along the only roads we can travel : he is so majestic that no humiliation of language can tarnish the glory of his excellency ; so he will allow us to talk about him as if he were a man ; we may speak of his seeing, hearing, grieving, pitying ; as subject to disappointment, and as wailing because of the apparent failures of his providence. All this method of revelation is an accommodation to our littleness. When we talk to children we talk their language, not ours ; we lay aside all the latest phrases and expressions, all linguistic gymnastics, and go right down to them and babble to them in their own prattle. God comes down to us and uses our words, enshrines his glory in our little vocables, and so permits us to have at least some hold upon him, that we may be rich with some hint and suggestion as to his infinity and glory. So when it is said the rough wind is as the sighing of God, the poetry is but a glorification of the grammar ; it does not despise the syntax but flies above it and lightens it from on high. It is a sublime and gracious truth : God pities, God sighs.

This text may be regarded as the key of the whole chapter. A perusal of the chapter will show what rough reading there is here and there, and yet how all the reading is centralised by this gracious testimony, that God, in all the rough ways of providence and government, means to bring the sons of men at last to be fruitful olive-trees, and he himself, according to this chapter, will in the end take off the leaves "one by one"—such is the prophet's own term—and will rejoice in the abundant fruitfulness of that which was once condemned to infertility, nay, which was all but blasted, save one little green sprout, which was left in sign that God had not wholly abandoned the plant. Through how many

images does the truth shine!—"In that day the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword" (ver. 1). What is the sword of God in Biblical language? It is symbolised by the lightning: a sword all edge, a sword without a handle, a sword which only God can touch. Have we ever used the lightning as a whip? Has any man ever been clever enough to put the lightning into his hand, and to use it as a sword? In what sense? In a sense so limited that he himself would be the very last to claim it in any suggestion as is the very life of this passage. The Lord "shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent." These are symbolical expressions. All the ancient forms of tyranny were represented by monstrous forms, living animals; and here we have "the piercing serpent," and "that crooked serpent:" what is the meaning of that? The meaning relates to the rush of the aggressive Tigris; and the crooked serpent relates to the sinuous movement of the Euphrates; and God says he will lay his lightning-sword upon both the rivers and cut them in twain. The whole reference is to aggressive war, serpent-like policy; and whether it be the Tigris with all its rush, or the Euphrates with all its gliding movement, God shall cut the rivers in two: all controversial policies, self-seeking designs, all cunning diplomacy, all the infernal cleverness of men who use language to conceal their thoughts: God's lightning flash shall cut them and their policies in twain; he will "frustrate their knavish tricks;" he will "confound their politics;" he will send them home bleeding at every pore, and sad at heart that they ever attempted the ill-paying game of lying. Thus the Lord is in what we may term the greater providences—namely, the providences that relate to empires, nationalities, dynasties, thrones; as well as in the more limited providences that number the hairs of our head, that watch over us lest our steps should slide, or lest at any moment we should dash our foot against a stone. All things are little to God: all things are equally great to him: there can be no relation between the finite and the infinite; how vast soever the finite, it is only a vastness of littleness, an attempt to touch the intangible. So all things are God's. "In that day" a song shall be sung about "a vineyard of red wine." The judgment will hardly have taken off its clouds until those who were afflicted shall begin

to sing of the goodness of God. Is it not so in practical life? Of what is life made up? Of tragedy, comedy; suffering, laughter; old age, and fresh childhood; trees gnarled and withered, and flowers that seem to have been dropped from heaven rather than to have come out of the cold earth. God will have a hymn sung, and he himself will dictate the words—

"I the Lord do keep it; I will water it every moment: lest any hurt it, I will keep it night and day. Fury is not in me: who would set the briers and thorns against me in battle? I would go through them, I would burn them together" (vers. 3, 4).

"Let him take hold of my strength." The captive fleeing away from his pursuers made straight for the altar, and if he could seize the horns of the altar in the sacred house he was safe. This is the image of the verse—"Let him take hold of my strength, that he may make peace with me; and he shall make peace with me." Flee to the sanctuary, flee to the altar; lay hold of righteousness and truth, for the very action of laying hold of righteousness and truth is an action which means confession, humiliation, penitence, trust in God, and renunciation of self. That ought to be the meaning of all church-going. To see a man hastening to his accustomed place of worship or some other hospitable sanctuary, should mean—he is fleeing from pursuit, he is conscious of sin, he feels the heart's deepest necessity, he is going to the fountain for water, he is going to his father's house for bread. Is that the meaning of church-going? Were it so, the Sabbath would double its golden hours, and we should feel that seated within God's house we were homed within an impenetrable rock, our security complete, and our vision of heaven without a cloud.

What has been God's purpose in all this?—growth. He has always meant by his pruning, and his great wind, and his terrible judgments, to increase the growing power of life. "In measure, when it shooteth forth, thou wilt debate with it" (ver. 8). When it shooteth forth, he will prepare the way for its expansion; he will so use his winds that growth shall be facilitated. He always means us to grow, to bring forth fruit. Herein is mercy, that whatever else has been taken away from us, growth-power has not been withdrawn. There lives not a man who may not this very moment begin to grow a better self, a nobler nature, a

diviner humanity. Very much has gone : youthful enthusiasm has vanished, old resolutions have been forgotten, many a faculty has fallen into desuetude, but still there is power to sigh, to look, to put out, how feebly soever, a hand heavenward, though it can hold itself up but for one moment. The meaning of this is that we may even yet become fruitful ; we may grow, we may reach a nobler humanity. This being so, the Gospel is a word of comfort, stimulus, encouragement. What sweeter word is there than this—"A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench" ? The reed is bruised, and it is difficult to get any music through it : there is not only a rift in the lute, but the reed itself is broken, and the player can perform but brokenly on such an instrument. But God will not break it. An impatient man would take it, and dash it on the ground, and ask for some better reed through which he might pour his music. God says, This can be amended, this reed need not be thrust away, not one child need be cast out as worthless, hopeless. God will not break the bruised reed. He will not quench the smoking flax. He might put his foot upon it and turn it to blackness, but he takes it up, shakes it—that is the idea—shakes it gently, like a torch that will not bear much movement, and then the fire begins to be fed by the shaking in the air, and now it begins to spread, and the shaking proceeds, until the whole is recovered. That is God's meaning in all his providences with us—to repair us, reconstruct us, renew us, make us new creatures, and bring us through many a rough wind and many an east wind and many a graveyard, to perfectness, to nobler stature, to valour of spirit, to pureness of communion. Who will yield himself to this noble ministration ? Let the prayer be—Great God of the winds, thou who hast the lightning flash in thine hand like a sword, thou who dost search men in rein and heart and innermost motive, do not let me fall out of thine hands or escape the ministry of thy love ! Do what thou wilt with me, only at last may I take part in the sweet hymn with which angels praise thee, and with which the sons of men shall in immortal song celebrate thy redeeming power !



## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, do thou deliver us from all false trusts, and lead us to repose our confidence in thee alone. We have gone astray from thy sanctuary. We have committed two evils: we have forsaken thee, the fountain of living waters, and we have hewn out unto ourselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water. We own it all; we are ashamed of it from beginning to end; we have returned, by thy grace, revealed in Christ Jesus the world's one Saviour, to the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls. Thou hast received us with open arms; thou hast fallen upon our neck, and kissed us, and clothed us, and given us the ornaments of heaven; and behold thou hast filled our life with all joy and sense of triumph. May we never stray any more; may we be like little children at home, asking God's will, anxious to do that will whatever it may be; and may our whole life be swallowed up of God, so that whatsoever be its service its reward shall be present and large. We rejoice that thou didst promise to the ancient church a king who should reign in righteousness: we have seen the true Hezekiah, we have come to live under the government of Immanuel, God with us. He is the King of grace; he is the King of glory: we will have this man to reign over us; we will not be the subjects of any other crown, we will live under the throne and sceptre of Christ. Mighty One, strong enough to bear the Cross for the sins of the world, rule us, dwell in us, make us like thyself, according to our degree, so that we too may be pure, may be sons of God, may be in the image and likeness of the Eternal. To this end continue to abide with us; break our bread at eventide, be our bright and morning star, be thou our midday glory. O Jesus, sweet Jesus, Christ of God, dwell with us; then we shall not be tempted to go elsewhere for succour and defence and gladness; thou wilt be all in all to us, and we shall know that thy riches are unsearchable, and thy wisdom past finding out, and that thou hast all things for the growing capacities of men. We rejoice that we love thee in some degree: but we would love thee wholly; we would that there were no rival affection, but that thou mightest sit upon the throne of our heart as with undisputed right. If we pray for this, surely this will be accomplished, —not to-day, nor to-morrow, but little by little, like a growing light, until the morning is lost in noontide. Hear us when we pray and when we praise; and may the end of all our education here be large wisdom, radiant holiness, and preparation for that lofty company to be found in the celestial city, white-robed, with palms in their hands, singing eternally, doing all thy will with a glad heart and an unwearying energy. Amen.

## Chapter xxviii. 1-13.

## A DENUNCIATION OF DRUNKENNESS.

THE prophet here denounces the drunkards of Ephraim. It has been well said that there is a "dry drunkenness." Men are drunk, but not with wine; sometimes they are drunk with prosperity, with vanity, with evil thoughts, passionate desires. Men may be sober, and yet may be drunk. Men may be total abstainers from wine, and may yet go straight down to hell. This ought to be very clearly understood. Some annotators have thought that reference is here made to this dry drunkenness. There is no need to avail ourselves of this interpretation; it is painfully evident that everything that is here said as against the princes of Ephraim belongs by all rights to the devil of literal drunkenness. The prophet himself is inflamed into a new intensity of feeling as he considers what has become of Ephraim, who never gave joy to any living soul. What man has a good word to say for Ephraim? It is a branded name. But the prophet cannot keep his prophecy within the old lines of Judah and Jerusalem, when he thinks of what is being done in the northern metropolis; he hears that the princes of that northern capital are drunk, and he pronounces woe from the very altar of heaven against the princes who are reeling through strong drink. There are moral rights, as well as geographical. Men may not on all occasions keep their denunciations to their own localities. Sometimes we are so affected by the depth, intensity, infamy of evil, that we feel within ourselves the right to denounce it, though it be done at the antipodes, and though the men who are doing it speak a language we cannot understand. Humanity overcomes locality. It will be a sad day when the prophets keep themselves within their own lines—parochial, metropolitan, imperial. Prophets ought to have no lines within which to minister their divine functions; they ought to make their voices heard wherever there is wrong to be denounced, wherever there is helplessness to be assisted. It is thus that the Lord enlarges the prophet himself, and often causes good to come out of evil. Life is an infinite complication. Were it so simple as some represent it to be, life would lose not only its mystery but its charm. Life needs its apocalypse as well as its alphabet.

How sad a thing that a glorious crown should ever come to be like a fading flower! "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." There is no genius that may not become an idiot. There is no son of the morning that may not quench his torch in the deepest degradation. God cares nothing for our crowns of glory, our high titles, our boasted pedigrees, our cloudy ancestries. He cares for character. His throne is built upon righteousness, and his criticism is conducted with reference to equity: what are the people morally, what are their prayers, what are their desires, what are their dispositions, what is their spiritual tone? Their poverty cannot hinder God's benediction, their obscurity shall be lighted with the candle of the Lord, and their prayers shall make the heavens bright because of the great answers which are sent down to the cry of the contrite heart.

The crown of Ephraim has become as a fading flower: then is all over in human history? When man fails, God seems to expand upon the vision of the universe with a new amplitude, and to glow with a new and unimagined splendour:—

"In that day shall the Lord of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, unto the residue of his people" (ver. 5).

The Lord will not leave the universe in the hands of drunken princes. The great purpose of the divine creation shall roll on to inevitable fruition and glory, though Ephraim turn aside, and Jerusalem herself—city of peace, city of beauty—be numbered amongst the cities of confusion. Our trust is in the living God. Princes disappoint us; prophets, preachers, teachers, go astray: the brightest minds suffer at least momentary eclipse: but God reigns, and that which is crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places shall be made plain; and, caught up in the great astronomic movement of infinity, all things angular, eccentric, and unmanageable shall be smoothed into rhythm, and God's universe shall sing God's praise.

When the Lord reigns he shall be—

"For a spirit of judgment to him that sitteth in judgment, and for strength to them that turn the battle to the gate" (ver. 6).

Great store shall be set by spiritual sagacity. Judgment shall take the place of the drunken and the incapable; the moral tone shall be rectified, and he shall most truly live in whom is the



spirit of judgment, the power of moral penetration—that appalling power of spiritual criticism which distinguishes between right and wrong, not only in broad lines of black and white, but in all the intricacy of moral duplicity : then shall God be glorified in his saints, for every saint shall be a judge, and where the good man walks the evil man shall not dare to show his face, unless it be stained with tears of penitence, and turned up in posture of prayer.

Gladly would we omit the detail, but it is written here with a specific minuteness which conveys the impression that it was meant to be read, syllabled out slowly, solemnly—

“But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way ; the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink ; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment ” (ver. 7).

Observe how the word “erred” occurs three times in this indictment. It is not the best word in the sense of most fully expressing the prophet’s meaning. A better word is “reeled” : —“but they also have reeled through wine—the priest and the prophet have reeled through strong drink—they reel in vision.” The picture is a vivid one, painful in its graphic clearness. We speak with some degree of horror of any man being drunk—if there be those who can laugh at a reeling drunkard, they know not what drunkenness is—but when it is a prophet who reels, a priest who staggers, a man of prayer who is blind through drink, then we say : How are the mighty fallen ! Help, Lord ; for the godly man ceaseth : when the righteous fail, what shall other men do ? Howl, fir-tree ; for the cedar is fallen.

“They are swallowed up of wine.” This is how all debasement continues, aggravates itself, and brings itself to shameful issue. No man begins at the point of being swallowed up in any evil : he approaches it almost stealthily, he touches it experimentally, he retains for a certain time his self-control in relation to it,—he will handle it, but easily, so that he can set it down again, should it so please him. But at the end there is swallowing up, destruction—death is in the cup, and death must be drunk up by those who put their lips to the forbidden vessel. When

Edward IV. condemned his own brother, George Duke of Clarence, to be killed, we are told that the duke desired to be drowned in a butt of Malmsey, and the historian well adds, "as became so stout a drunkard." To this end may men come who never dreamed of coming to it, who meant to show the world how easy it would be to toy with the devil, to touch him, set him back, smile at him, laugh at him, use him as a dog, bind him as a slave; and to all these initial usages will the devil submit himself, knowing that at some fatal unsuspected moment he will lasso the man who supposes he can take him captive, and he will carry him away to the chambers of death.

Nor did the matter end there. Drunken men have a speech of their own. There is a bad language of intoxication:—

"Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little" (vers. 9, 10).

How often is that passage misunderstood; what does it mean? It means that the drunkards are now chaffering; their saliva is falling out of their mouths, and with a wicked diabolic leer they are mocking the prophet and the priest; and the passage ought to be read thus:—"Whom shall he bring to know what he calls knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand what he calls doctrine? he talks as if he were talking to babes just weaned, as if he were talking to those who have just been drawn from the breasts: he does not know that we are men, strong wise men: what is his talk? what is his sermon? It is precept upon precept—alphabet upon alphabet—line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little,—a commonplace talker speaking to us men as if we were newly weaned babes, with his precept upon precept! Hear the babbler! Call him a teacher!" ✓  
The meaning can only be represented by sounds suggestive of intoxication. The men who speak thus are men of inflamed eyes, livid lips, babbling speech. Many men who are not under the influence of wine mock their teacher; they speak of commonplace exhortation—"precept upon precept"—the same old lines of thought, the same faded story, the same alphabetic pleadings. The true prophet can bear the mockery, because he is true.

But what came to the men who mocked their prophets? Mark how consistent is the divine retribution. We have heard of bears coming out of the wood and destroying those who mocked Elisha; what saith the Scripture at this point?

"For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people" (ver. 11).

They shall have change of ministry; the Assyrians do not talk piously, whiningly; they do not give precept upon precept—theirs is a terse eloquence, a bullock-like rhetoric; when they come they will make these drunkards sober by the power of terror. This is God's way in all providence; if we will not hear the gentle voice, the interpreting, persuasive, gospel voice, we shall have to listen to thunder, and feed our souls upon lightning. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, . . . your house is left unto you desolate."

"To whom he said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear" (ver. 12).

Ministers are said to be behind the times when they offer in Christ's own name rest to weary souls; teachers are said to have fallen astern when they speak of refreshing, and comfort, and high inspiration nerving the soul to the discharge of moral duty; and they are supposed to be contemporaneous prophets who chatter the gossip of the day, and annotate the newspaper which to-morrow will be forgotten. The prophet is stung into a just reprisal. The thirteenth verse takes up the very words of the drunken mockers and uses them right solemnly—

"But the word of the Lord was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little" (ver. 13).

It was so,—as if he had said, You may mock it, but now that you put it so I do not shrink from affirming that it was so, and therein shall lie the gravity of your offence and the justice of your retribution. Men must not imagine that their mockery is forgotten, that it has dropped out of the mind of God and will not be brought up against them any more. The Lord knoweth how his servants are received and treated, and how his own word is regarded; and men who mock in drunkenness shall

themselves be mocked when they are sober. To be reminded of what we said when we were mad is to make us twice mad. To be told that in our insanity we thus mocked the living God will surely drive us into further wildness and intolerable self-reproach. Nothing is so easy as mockery; nothing is so unprofitable, nothing is so self-avenging. It is quite easy to mock any preacher. Let not the young be led astray by those who by excellent imitation of the speaker may seek to deprive his appeals of point. It is a mean accomplishment; it is an unprofitable trick; it is an unworthy artifice. If it be done innocently, for so-called artistic purposes, it may be excusable enough, but where the purpose is to avert the appeal, to destroy the spiritual effect, then any man who goes home from church to mock the preacher in the hearing of his children is an unnatural parent, and any one who endeavours to lessen the influence of gospel appeal is a practical blasphemer. His day will come. Mocking voices will appeal to his ear and spectres will address his vision, and he shall hear himself repeated until he shall say, Spare me! What then shall we do? Take heed unto our ways. Pray that our lips may be kept, and our mouth may be watched from on high; and pray that we may never submit to that tempting which issued in the overthrow of Ephraim and in the fading of a glorious crown. There is no safety but in Christ. There is no security but at the Cross. There is nothing that can keep out the devil but the power of the Son of God, even he the Christ of heaven, who slew the enemy, and overcame with mighty victories. Let our heart say, "Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe." O Jesus, when Satan tempts me, answer thou thyself from within my heart, for my poor tongue cannot speak with energy sufficient to repel the ingenuity and the baseness of the tempter. No man ever sought Jesus Christ's interposition in this way, with a humble self-renouncing heart, who did not instantly realise it, and come back, saying, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, we bless thee for Jesus Christ thy Son, the gift of thy love, the seal of thy grace. He is fairest among ten thousand, and altogether lovely; his face was indeed marred more than any man's, yet through all the scar there shone a light not of earth. We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. The bruising could not disguise him; every wound he bore was but a new point of glory yet to shine. We gather around his Cross, and behold the amazing spectacle. Our hearts tremble within us because we know who wrought this deed of woe; our sin crucified the Son of God. There is none righteous; no, not one. We know who drove the nail, who thrust the spear, who plaited the crown of thorns, and pressed it on the temples of innocence; we take shame to ourselves. It is not historical, but personal; it did not occur long ago only, it occurs this day. God forgive us; God be merciful unto us sinners, and enable us to know that through all this mystery of suffering thou art bringing the eternal heaven of holiness and rest and perfectness. We do not end at the Cross; yea, at the Cross we do but begin; what thou shalt reveal, who can tell? what fancy can forecast? Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor can imagination suppose, what is yet to come. Thou wilt show the meaning of it all; the light shall be more than the darkness, the earth shall yield the root, but all heaven shall be too small for the blossom and the fruit. Enable men to flock to Christ, to run to him, to flee as one might flee to a city of refuge who had been guilty of bloodshed. Thus may we live in Christ, and live for Christ, that we may be Christ's at his coming. Amen.

## Chapter xxviii. 14-29.

### FOUNDATIONS AND COVENANTS.

"Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, and sure foundation" (ver. 16).

THIS is not the only "stone" referred to in this chapter; in the thirteenth verse we read words that refer to another quality of stone: "That they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken." The meaning is that the men to whom a great offer of rest and refreshing had been made had declined to fall in with the holy overture, and therefore, as

they had rejected the stone, elect of God and precious, they must of necessity—not by arbitrary decree, but because of that system of alternatives on which the universe is based—encounter in a backward movement a stone of stumbling, striking which they fell back, and were broken. Thus it will ever be. Men cannot refuse the Gospel, and be right; reject God, and be at peace; take their own course, and rule an obedient creation. Alternatives are put before us, reason is invoked, statements upon both sides are made with critical care, and men are called upon to answer the solemn appeal. If we fall upon Christ we shall be broken; but if that stone fall upon us we shall be ground to powder. The Gospel message is found in the fact that it is for ourselves to decide which course we shall take. Blessed be God, no man is forced to hell.

What use did the apostles make of this rich and noble passage? The Apostle Paul used it (Eph. ii. 19-22):—"Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord; in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." The Apostle Peter (1 Pet. ii. 6-8) availed himself of the opportunity of commenting upon this great foundation:—"Wherefore also it is contained in the Scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient." Here again we face the solemn alternative of life. "A tried stone," literally, a stone of proof; and that may be regarded in either of two senses, or in both. First, it is a stone of proof, because it stands every test that can be applied to it. Praise no stone until you have tested it. Laud no doctrine until you have tried it in the market-place, in the sick chamber, in the valley of the shadow of the deepest distress; then come forward



and say what the stone was worth, how it bore the strain, what it was in the sense of security, and comfort, and dignity and satisfaction. When you hear the last patented religion praised, pay no heed to the trivial eulogium; it is a patent that has not been put to the proof; it has done nothing for the world; it has no long, noble, dignified history behind it; it glitters, but it has not been proved in life's long night of pain and restlessness and sorrow. Be jealous of new inventions which relate to the kingdom of heaven. Have faith in nothing that does not come up from eternity. Believe not in any sacrifice that was not offered before the world began. Herein it is true that antiquity signifies experience, uses that can be employed for purposes of inference and solid deduction. In this sense Jesus Christ was a stone of proof: he was tried morning, noon, and night: in the cold and in the heat, in all the variation of life's changeful scene; and this is the record which is made of him by those who have followed him throughout. "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever,"—most precious when most needed, strongest when the enemy is most importunate, completest in all attribute, faculty, and grace when hell gathers itself up for final tremendous onslaught upon his dignity and worth. Is it too much to ask that those who have tested Christ and known him to be a stone of proof should say so publicly, privately, quietly, emphatically, and gratefully? and should so preach the Gospel to every creature with whom they come in contact? The preaching of the Gospel is not only a trumpet proclamation; it is a quiet speech, a sacred, private, personal assurance as well; it is man talking to man, and saying, I have tried Christ, and found him to be infinitely sufficient for all the need and pain of life.

The second sense in which the text would hold good would be that Jesus Christ tries every character. Not only is Jesus Christ himself tried, but he tries every man. Therefore many have left him. He tries whether the heart is giving itself in full consecration to his service, or whether it is trifling with the occasion, yielding to the spirit of compromise and concession,—a kind of giving and taking in which God and Mammon hold equal places. "If any man will follow me, let him take up his cross." In the church there is but one badge, one symbol, one password; it is

not genius, learning, intellectual capacity, profound acquisition in difficult subjects,—it is the Cross. Therefore so few men understand Christianity. The one thing they omit from the statement of its range and claim is the Cross. Christianity is a disposition, not a tenet; a temper, not a dogma; a condition of heart, not a stored memory, not a grate of iron filled with unlighted fuel. He is a Christian who has no self: he has denied himself; he has said No to himself. This is a conquest which is only won in solitude; this is a victory of which a man need not speak, because his whole life tells the tale in simplest eloquence. If our will has not been taken and broken, shattered, we know nothing about Jesus Christ, though we be living catechisms, and animated encyclopædias, and breathing theological dictionaries: we know Christ only as we have denied ourselves,—not pinched ourselves here and there, and treated ourselves to a little partial discipline of starvation, but obliterated ourselves,—then we are Christians. How different from this our daily attitude and feeling! We now go to preachers to hear whether they are right or wrong. He is right who has no self: he is wrong who consults his own will or feeling in anything. He prays who says, “Not my will, but thine, be done,” and he never prays who does not say these words from his heart’s core, the innermost plasm of his soul; though he speak to the condescending heavens in elaborate eloquence, he prays not till shedding, as it were, great drops of blood, he says—“Nevertheless!” Then he comes from the altar, and there can be no Cross to him in any sense that tries his fortitude: he has died; he now knows the mystery of grace. Thus Jesus Christ tries the quality of men. Have we been so tried? No preacher may elaborate that inquiry; he must whisper it, rather than loudly announce it, and he must even in whispering it feel that he has hardly the right to ask that question until he himself is the living reply.

What is the consequence of building upon such a foundation—namely, “a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation”? The result is—“He that believeth shall not make haste.” In other words, faith means peace. How we fret and fume because we have no faith! We want to live in to-morrow, simply because we have no trust. Did we really build ourselves



upon the living foundation, we should have neither to-day nor to-morrow—we should be with God. Find a Christian who is in anxiety about anything, and you find a man who is only nominally Christian : he is excited about the state of the Church, about the condition of public feeling in relation to the Cross and to Christian doctrine ; he heats himself, poor little soul, imagining that so much depends upon his puny arm. Be calm. Trust in the living God. He will take care of his own ark, his own truth, his own kingdom. Faith will give steadfastness. Faith is the inspiration of dignity and the security of hope. He who has once been with Christ in the sanctuary of vital communion comes away from the interview saying, All is well : why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing ? and why does the Church excite itself with little solitudes and small inquiries and frivolous doubts ? The kingdom cometh, and as the sun shineth from the east even unto the west, so shall Christ's lustre shine above all glory, filling the firmament of infinite space with morning everlasting. Church of the living God, thou shouldst be calm, strong, because deeply in sympathy with Christ, and acquainted in the very heart with all the sacred purpose of God. Confidence in the Eternal gives perfect calmness.

What shall become of other buildings ? Many other edifices are proceeding at the same time : what shall become of them ?

“Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet : and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place ” (ver. 17).

That is their end ! They are large, pretentious, popular, thronged, from gallery to basement they are populated ; but they shall be thrown down, the earth shall vomit their foundations and will not have them, for it is God's earth, and nature will fight for God. What will God do ? Judgment will he lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet. Either of two meanings may be taken here, both consonant and both profitable. God will apply moral criticism to the state of the world. It shall be a case of judgment and righteousness. Not a question of profession, or decoration, or external or nominal standing ; but a question of character : everything will be settled by that inquiry. It is

rational. Who would refuse to 'be tried by judgment? Who would decline to have his building tested by the plummet? God has written a Bible of nature and a Bible of geometry, and we are obliged to go to chapter and verse and build according to the Moses of mathematics, the Joshua and Judges of geometry, the Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John of the construction of the stars. We may reject a paper Bible, but we are bound to go to the Bible of great geometric nature. A man shall build a course of three stones or six bricks, and see how jauntily he builds! He has no need of plummet: what an eye he has for the perpendicular! But just as the structure rises the builder cannot trust himself. If life were a question of two courses of stones, any man could build; nature would be enough for him as it is revealed to his own eyesight: but let him build high, and he says, Where is the plummet, where is the geometric test? Aye, God finds us out in wall-building! We reject him in our highest thinking, but we are obliged with most significant humiliation to build according to the plumb-line. It should be so in character. If life were simply a question of giving and taking, who could not conduct life for himself? The stronger would always take, and the weaker would always be obliged to give, and there would be an end of the simple trick; but life is complex, life is mysterious, life is an affair of infinite aspects; and influences and ministries are operating and interpenetrating by reaches which we cannot of our own sagacity unfold and understand. So we should call for God's plumb-line, saying, Eternal Builder, give us the standard, give us that string with the weight at the end that always swings with the universe, that though for the time it oscillate will in the end settle down to the geometry of creation. The plumb will not tell lies to please any builder; the plumb will never pass a crooked wall, saying, This will do: it is perpendicular enough. Nothing will do until it is upright, until it is squared by the astronomy of the heavens. We must build with the stars, or our building will be thrown down in the night time.

The test, therefore, you observe, is a fair one. Our building is to be tested by judgment and righteousness, not by man's judgment, not by man's partial righteousness, but by judgment and righteousness as God understands and applies these terms. Or

there may be another meaning. The Gospel may be even here. Does it mean that God will punish according to measure? In administering the great system of retribution, will he lay judgment to the line and righteousness to the plummet, and say, These poor creatures have had no chance in life: the circumstances under which this nation has lived have been circumstances of infinite discouragement: no man cared for this man's soul, therefore I must measure the man himself accordingly; he never heard of Christ, Cross, sacrifice, cleansing blood, pardon through propitiation; he must not be damned? Were any to suggest that such meaning is hidden under these symbols, why should we reject a meaning so evangelical, so charged with the very wine of the Gospel, so like the Saviour, who said, "From him to whom much has been given shall much be expected; but from them to whom little has been given little shall be looked for"? O Son of Mary, Son of man, Son of God, thou wilt not beat him with many stripes who had few chances in life. We rest in thy grace.

What becomes of false securities, false treaties?—

"Your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it" (ver. 18).

What had these men done? They had explained themselves in a previous verse, saying: "We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves" (ver. 15). In other words: We saw the moral condition and outline of things, but we have arranged accordingly; we have had an interview with death, and we have said to the grim tyrant, If you will be gracious to us we will pay what taxation you demand; we have been closeted with hell, and we have cooled its burning fury with many a bribe, so that we have acclimatised ourselves to perdition's heat: now we have nothing more to care for; let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die: death will say, Hail! well met! and hell will rise to meet us with cordial hospitality: we have arranged all these matters; now we listen no more to the prophets who say, Line upon line, precept

upon precept; do—do—do,—don't—don't—don't: we have got rid of all that, and now we are at peace. You have made a covenant with death and an agreement with hell; but has death or hell made covenant or agreement with you? Is the bond twice signed? Produce it that we may examine the signatures and test the witnesses. When did death speak truly to him who had bribed it? When did hell enter into a *bonâ fide* alliance with any man who wished to sprinkle a little water upon its flame and cool its devouring thirst? Let it be said in plain words, yea, written down in letters that the hastiest traveller in the flight of his journey may read it, that hell cannot tell the truth. You cannot make any binding covenant with a bad man, much less with all evil, symbolised and typified in the word death or hell. The bad man will serve you so long as it suits his purpose to do so. A man who will tell lies for you will tell lies to you. A man who will make you rich through robbery will make you poor through the same means when it suits his purpose to do so. You cannot enter into a binding agreement with a liar. Can you enter into such an agreement with a murderer? The devil is liar and murderer, and was so from the beginning,—that is to say, he never had anything better in him; he began in evil. So the Lord is aware of all our soliloquies, when we hold monologue, saying in our solitary pacing up and down, "We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us; for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves." It is an awful thing to hear such words as these pronounced aloud by another voice. There are some things we permit ourselves to say to ourselves, but if another voice were to repeat them in our hearing, we should feel as if all judgment had fallen upon us in the upbraiding and awful tone. The Lord repeats the words aloud; he says, "Your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand." Nothing stands but truth; nothing remains but honour; nothing is eternal in comfort but the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

What if we have paid attention to everything but the foundation? That is possible. What if we have built a beautiful

house, large, well-appointed, and have brought artists from afar to make the walls almost live with symbolic beauty. But suppose we have built the fairy palace upon a bog, and we knew it. Would that be approved in common life? Would the inspector or surveyor pass even for an insurance award a house that was so built? and shall we be wise on all these matters, and fools in life-building? Shall we be solid men, men of solemn mind, of real true judgment, with regard to all transitory matters, and fools with regard to affairs eternal? "According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise master-builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is." Oh, look at that tongue of flame, that critic of fire! It will be your turn next! That man's house has just passed—barely passed; this man's house is burned down, but because he was on the right foundation, he himself was saved—"yet so as by fire." It required an angel to pluck him from that extremity. Now it is coming to your house. See the flame—long, blue, red, all colours—leaping, testing the work, seizing it: how fares it with the house? Doth it stand? It looks as if it were going to stand. It is built of gold and silver and precious stones. See the fire makes no impression upon it! Thank God! Now it is going up to the roof, and even there it can make no impression; and the flame falls back, and says in effect, This house is well built. The next is the fool's house. Ah me! Who can look at the trial? Oh that it might take place in the darkness! Oh that our ears might be deafened with sleep when the crash comes! for great shall be the fall of it.

## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, we have put our trust in the Rock of Ages, in the Eternal God, in the pavilion of the Most High, where we are hidden from the strife of tongues, and though the heathen rage and the people imagine a vain thing, yet is our confidence assured and our hope is without a cloud. All this high estate of faith and rest is given unto us through Jesus Christ our Lord. His are unsearchable riches; his blessedness is profound and never can be disturbed. In his peace we have tranquillity, in his sovereignty we reign as kings. We bless thee for the condescension of thy Son; for his life upon earth; for all his gracious and tender ministry; for his sacrificial death, for his resurrection from the dead, and his intercession on high; great mysteries of light, great mysteries of love: we have no answer to them; yet is there an answer in our own hearts from the heavens, which is one of peace and confidence and hope. Regard us in all the various relations we sustain; and may we, in the house, and in the church, and in the city, and in the market-place, and in the sanctuary of affliction, show that our faith sustains us, burns us like an unconsuming fire, lifts us up to the third heaven where we commune with God, and makes us pure, gentle, true, and noble towards one another. If thou wilt work this miracle in us, we will praise thee with a loud voice for thy marvellous works.

## Chapter xxviii. 24-29.

### THE PARABLE OF AGRICULTURE.

“Doth the plowman plow all day to sow? doth he open and break the clods of his ground? When he hath made plain the face thereof, doth he not cast abroad the fitches, and scatter the cummin, and cast in the principal wheat and the appointed barley and the rie in their place?” (vers. 24, 25).

THIS is a kind of parable of agriculture. It has pleased God through the prophet to show somewhat of his method of discipline, and somewhat of his purpose of government. In effect, he says—Look at agriculture, and you will see on a small scale what I am doing on a scale immeasurably larger: look at the farmer, and see the spiritual cultivator; look at the method of producing food, and learn something of the method of producing character. This is an invaluable method of teaching, because it enables us to get quite close to the divine worker. When he



himself fixes the symbol, when he calls attention to any actor or economy, and says, Watch there, and you will see as much as you now can see of my purpose and method, we should look with undivided attention, so that nothing shall escape our notice; for God himself has fixed the lesson book and told us to read with the utmost care. Let us yield ourselves to the spell of every vision, or parable, or sign that can help us to understand a little more than we can at present comprehend of the divine spirit and method and purpose.

What is ploughing? Does a man plough merely for exercise? Does ploughing express a whim for ground-cutting? Do we say, Every man has his occupation or his amusement, and this man has taken up with the fancy of cutting the ground, simply that he may exercise himself in a bodily way, and promote his own health? Ploughing is not an end. Ploughing is a means to an end. Everything depends upon our seizure of that simple fact. That is the explanation of discipline. There is nothing in the discipline itself. God does not smite, and cut, and bruise, and slay merely for the purpose of showing that he is much stronger than we are. He does not exercise almightiness in crushing feebleness. When he sends the red-hot ploughshare through our heart he has an object in view: that is an act preparatory to some other act. We miss the whole genius, and moral inspiration of discipline if we suppose that we are merely clay in the hands of a potter, merely objects upon which God plays off the miracles of his omnipotence. That view is full of insult to God's wisdom and God's love. When the Lord throws a man down it is not that he may trample him in the dust, but that he may work in him some wondrous ministry of grace and love. Let us understand, therefore, that all the discipline through which we pass is in itself nothing. We are no better for the discipline which we have not turned to account. Who is the better for the food he has not digested; for the books he has merely read in the letter without ever storing them in his mind, or digesting knowledge into wisdom? The mere fact of our having suffered a great deal amounts to nothing, if we have not made life through suffering. In fact, unless we have done that we are the worse for the suffering. It comes to one of two

issues: either we are softened, subdued, chastened, purified, and refined by the discipline we have undergone; or, Pharaoh-like, our hearts are hardened, and our soul withdraws itself within a more obstinate induration, so that God's light and rain and smile cannot penetrate to the soul's hiding-place, and make it glad. We are to be co-workers with God in all this matter of discipline. To submit because we cannot successfully resist is not piety. To kiss the rod and say, Bless the hand that wields it! is true religion. Where God ploughs he means to sow. If we could realise that word it would be comfort to the comfortless, the very beginning of heaven to those who think they have been forsaken. Could the earth speak, it would say, I have felt the hard plough to-day; I know what is coming, I have now to do something; in due time I shall be sown with seed, and in a few days or weeks or months I shall be crowned with gold, or I shall be decorated with a robe of many colours: when the plough-point first struck me I was full of pain and distress, and I could have cried out for very agony, for the point was sharp, and the ploughman drove it through me with great energy; but, now I bethink me, this means the blade, the ear, the full corn in the ear, golden harvest, and harvest-home; and what a rest I shall have when I have done my duty, filled the barns of men, and driven hunger away from the streets and homes of the world. In all such apologies there is a veil of fine teaching, could we bow down ourselves in our intellectual vanity to accept it, and could we so far subdue our moral obstinacy as to receive the sacred lesson. When the plough of God's providence first cuts up a man's life, what wonder if the man should exclaim a little, yea, if he should give way to one hour's grief, and say he thought he had escaped all that kind of treatment! But the man may come to himself ere eventide and say, Plough on, Lord; I want my life to be ploughed all over that it may be sown all over, and that in every corner there may be golden grain or beautiful flowers: pity me that I exclaimed when I first felt the plough-share; thou knowest my frame, thou rememberest that I am but dust, but now I recollect, I put things together, I see thy meaning; so drive on, thou Ploughman of Eternity. Then pain has a meaning, loss has a blessing, death is a great black door that swings back upon immortality.



If we are to read between the lines of this parable, and discover divine methods from human actions, then we should see that different characters require different treatment. There is a spirit of discrimination running throughout the whole statement. For "fitches" read "fennel seed"; and fennel seed is amongst the very smallest of seeds, as indeed so is cummin. This is to be sown broadcast. It is not to be sown mechanically or geometrically, but is cast abroad, thrown out with a lavish hand on every side. Now wheat and barley, referred to also in the text, are larger, and they are to be dropped in more deliberately and carefully, and run into lines. The wise cultivator adopts different methods. Discrimination is a secret of power. With regard to character and its treatment, we are to have compassion on some, making a difference. It is even so with the wise teacher. He says, What can these scholars bear? what quality are they? what is their intellectual range? can I give strong-meat to all, or must I give milk to some? Every one must have a portion of meat in due season. There are times when the preacher must broadcast his gospel, and speak in great general statements of invitation, exhortation, and appeal, so that all men may have an opportunity of catching somewhat of the heavenly voice, somewhat of the heavenly seed. Then there are times when he is quite a different man, so much so that they who only look upon the external say they would not have thought it was the same preacher. In the first instance he was sowing fennel seed, cummin,—something that required to be thrown abroad, cast forth with great liberality; and in the second place he was slowly, deliberately, carefully going through his exposition, his grammar, his statement of dogmatic truth, his vindication of great solemn doctrines; he was a careful husbandman, studying the field, studying the seed, studying the season; in that ministry, in so far as he was a devoted servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, he was faithful to his trust, giving to each what each could take, and using each occasion for its own special purpose. Herein there should be great co-operation between preacher and hearer, teacher and scholar, pastor and flock. Regarding the minister as a husbandman, those who are wise and who are looking on should say, To-day he is sowing fennel seed: watch with what a liberal hand he throws it abroad, even at the risk of a great deal of it being lost, inasmuch

as it may fall into stony places or amongst thorns, and may bring forth nothing in the end ; still, he goes forth hopefully, saying in effect, All this seed may come back again, some ten, some thirty, some sixty, some an hundred fold. Then they shall say, To-day he is busy with the rye and the wheat and the barley and another kind of seed or grain altogether ; and now look how carefully he lays down the lines, and how sedulously he plies his vocation ; in the whole of it he means that there shall be fruit, food, harvest, and at the end of all there shall be a great harvest-home sung by himself and those who have been with him in the mystery of his husbandry.

The ploughman is divinely instructed—"his God doth instruct him" (ver. 26). Literally—"he treateth each as is fitting, his God instructing him." There is nothing rough-and-ready ; everything is studied, adapted, and directed to an end. In all labour there is profit. The difficulty is lest the field itself should start up and say, I want to be otherwise treated, especially I want to be let alone. Then the work of husbandry becomes very wearisome and impracticable. But where the field can say, Oh thou sent of God to make the most of me, I yield myself into thy hands ! then every seed day is a harvest day : to sow is to reap, to scatter is to gather, and all the days are too short, so sunny are they and so rich and sacred with music. "His God doth instruct him." Ploughing is not an art of our discovery. We discover somewhat of the plough, but the ploughing is a far greater thing than the plough. We mistake the instrument for the music in many instances. We think that having fashioned a hammer we have sundered a rock ; we suppose that because we have made a mechanical arrangement we have got into the very secret of creation and are working from the internal centre. Ploughing was in man at his very creation. Almost the first thought he had was about ploughing. But he had no plough. Given the inspiration of ploughing, and the plough will soon be found. Given the desire to find God, and God will soon be forthcoming. Given the passion for reading, and books will be procured if they cannot be bought or borrowed. The spirit of wisdom will find out the sanctuary of understanding. What is wanted is the spirit, the genius, the inspiration, the overwhelming

spiritual impulse. You cannot keep a man back from making a plough who has the spirit of agriculture in him. With regard to his plough he would be very critical : it should be thus, and so, and he will offer prizes for improvements, and when it is finished, he will suppose that he thought of ploughing himself, and is the secret and inspiration of his own action. No. There is a metaphysic behind everything. There is a mystery in a plain deal. The agnostic takes up a beam of wood and says, All I can do is to say that it is forty inches long, six inches one way, and nine another : but what is in it I cannot tell. So with regard to all our civilisation, and culture, and progress ; so with our hewing of marble into images that almost speak. The Lord doth instruct the cultivators, husbandmen, artists, painters, poets, teachers, merchantmen, all according to his own wisdom and purpose. Recognising this, we shall see in variety only a large display of divine wisdom ; in eccentricity we shall see a divine action, not a human whim ; in all out-of-the-way things we shall see the colonial dependencies and relationships of the great central crown. Ploughing may be praying. To work may be to worship. He who can truly say, "I got this plough from God," prays when he seizes it with both hands. He loves it as the musician loves his instrument.

But after ploughing and sowing there is something more ; how is the food itself to be produced ?—

"For the fitches are not threshed with a threshing instrument, neither is a cart wheel turned about upon the cummin ; but the fitches are beaten out with a staff, and the cummin with a rod " (ver. 27).

What does all that mean ? It means divine wisdom. This is a beautiful illustration of the way in which discipline is measured and administered. Fennel seed is not threshed with iron ; when the crop comes the wise farmer takes a little rod and gently taps it, or he seizes it with a gentle hand and shakes it so as to get the fruit, the multiplied seed. But when he has to deal with wheat or barley, then he wants the flail, the threshing instrument. Things must be treated according to their nature. So it is with man. Some men require very little hard usage. A tap will do, a gentle stroke, a touch that hardly

amounts to a blow, a ministry that may be wrought out with the tips of the fingers. Other men require flail, and iron instrument, and harrow, and cart wheel, and rough treatment: they are differently organised, they are differently constituted. What would be thought of a man who blew up birds' nests with gunpowder? Who would not say, There is great want of proportion in that man's method of looking at things; he is expending far too much energy upon the object? So with regard to the divine discipline. Some men could be almost brought to fulness or fruition by a smile. Of some men God says, Thou art not far from the kingdom of heaven; one little step would bring thee right home. God whispers some men into heaven. But what thunder he needs for others! It would seem as if he must almost tear the heavens asunder to arouse the attention of some men. God treats character according to the variety of character. With the wheat how gentle he is! He will not break the bruised reed; he will not quench the smoking flax. Christ will not lift up his voice, or cry, or cause himself to be heard in the streets; and at other times he will stand forth and pour out his woes like a cataract of maledictions. The divine economy has different aspects. The divine ministry works in different ways. We must not judge one another according to the processes through which we have passed. That is an unwise administration of the kingdom of heaven which insists that each man should have the same experiences, pass through the same processes, and be able to express himself in the same language with every other man. Nowhere is that unwisdom to be found in any book of God's writing. Everywhere God recognises differences, sometimes critical and infinitesimal, altogether concealed from human analysis, and he is Lord, not man, not the priest, not the minister, not the teacher. There is one Lord. Let him work according to his own counsel, for he moves from eternity.

The end of discipline is to produce fruit, satisfaction, solid result. But observe that whether in the case of the fennel seed or the wheat there is an instrumentality, a tapping or a bruising, something that amounts to test, trial, discipline. Here we find a word which occurs frequently in Scripture, and is associated

with a very vivid and suggestive etymology, the word "tribulation." It comes from the word *tribulum*, and tribulum means a threshing instrument. Whatever the man used who was treating the growth in its latest phases was called a tribulum, and he tribulated the harvest into bread. The seed did not go from the field into the oven; it had to undergo the action of the tribulum. Watch it there: what is that seed now undergoing? tribulation. This is the bread that came out of much tribulating, tribulation, tearing asunder, shaking, beating. In order to get a real grip of any language one ought to have a dictionary all pictures. The great words of human speech represent some human action or invention or ministry or method. A hundred instances will occur at once. Here you see the tribulum, a threshing instrument; threshing or tribulating; tribulation necessary as a middle action between the growth and the bread that man can eat. Now that you see the thing before your eyes, now that it is pictured to the imagination, you can easily transfer the process to moral tribulating, tribulation. A man has g<sup>h</sup>wn all over—fennel seed or cummin, or wheat, or rye, or barley. Is that enough? No. Now all that he has grown must pass through the action of the tribulum; it must be tribulated into food that men can eat. So figure the language you speak that you shall be master of all its uses. Take an instance, given by one of the most acute etymologists. We had the word "desultory": what is the meaning of that word? Only he can tell who knows the picture; and only he can never forget it who knows the picture. To be in the dramatic history of the word is to be master of all its uses and is to be saved from its misapplication. Here is an amphitheatre: here is a great ring: within that ring there are many horses: guiding and using the horses is a man, who leaps from one horse to another; what is his name—official name? *Desultor*; he is the desultor—the leaper from one horse to another. So the desultory conversation is a conversation that leaps from one subject to another; the desultory book is the book that leaps from one topic to another,—here speaking of agriculture, there speaking of astronomy; here the gossip of the day, yonder the philosophy of the century. So this word tribulum also brings up its picture, and having once laid hold of it the mind keeps it for ever, and the sufferer takes



it with him into the sanctuary of his sorrow, and he says, This is right; I have been in the open fields, I have been ploughed, I have been sowed, I have grown all this character: now I must be tribulated, or the whole thing would be lost; certainly I must undergo the action of the tribulum. "Yea," saith the apostle, "we glory in tribulations also, knowing that tribulation worketh"—and then comes the list of the virtues and the graces issuing from the action of the threshing instrument. Let the well-fed and the prosperous remember that if they have not been tribulated, whatever they may have grown in the field of their life, it has not come into utility for the blessing of others. "No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous." The crop never said, I like the action of the tribulum; it rather said, I should be glad if I could do without this, it is unpleasant; but it is necessary. How good some of us might be if we could have a little more tribulation! but when every bargain means an increase of property; when every day means a battlefield in which we win the victory; when the putting out of the hand is equal to the giving of a command that cannot be disobeyed; when we say to one, Go, and he goeth, to another, Come, and he cometh; and when to breathe is to prosper,—how can we enter the kingdom of heaven? Others there are who seem always to be in tribulation: they are not strong, they have few opportunities in life; they are baffled and disappointed; their dreams are all turned into nightmares that afflict and affrighten them, and all life seems to be a process of pain. It is even so. It must be hard to bear. It is hardest, methinks, poor sufferer, when thou art silent. I would have thee talk. "It soothes poor misery listening to her tale." It is when thou art silent that I fear the tribulum is most severe upon thee. Oh that thou couldst cry a whole hour—yea, shed tears all the day long, for then next day would be a day of joy. Bear it. Say, Lord, it is hard, but not too hard if thou wilt stand near me: I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. Poor tribulated heart, God is now getting out of thee what is necessary for thine own sustenance. Let him alone. Do not interfere with him. Yield thyself and say, Thy will, my God, be done!

## Chapter xxix.

### THE DOOM OF ARIEL.

**T**HIS is a mysterious chapter, and has been left practically unexplained. No one can say what "Ariel" means, definitely; though there are some etymological suggestions which are not wanting in value. It is a poetical term. The best conjecture is that it signifies Jerusalem. Men have often to speak and to write in cipher; especially in Scriptural days had men to do the best they could with their meaning, owing to circumstances of a hostile nature. The Bible is full of cipher. These wonderful love-letters could only be understood in some parts by the people who had the corresponding code. We have codes of business: why not codes of love? The Apocalypse is full of cipher, and commentators who have not the key make strange discord out of that sacred music. The people to whom the Apocalypse was written knew it, in all its range of thought and meaning, because they had the keywords; they knew what the writer meant when he said "Babylon." But in days when tyrants ruled, and men had to apologise for their faith with their blood, it was well to have some masonry, some signs which could only be understood by the initiated; then one little line stood for a whole volume of meaning; every word had an alias which was understood by the reader; so that words which are very mysterious to modern students were charged with light and music and heart passion to those to whom they were originally addressed. Still, it is wonderful how with all the ciphers men can use, the love of God will overflow them all, and assert itself in many a flash or whisper or spectral outline to be seen only when the eyes are shut. David dwelt—or encamped—which is a better rendering—in the fortress of Zion. That gives us some hint as to the locality that is indicated by this poetical or symbolical

term Ariel—*lion-heart*; or, variously, and sharply different, hearthstone,—a place made warm by altar-fire, the innermost chamber of the divine home, where wanderers felt the glow of divine hospitality and the secureness of divine protection. Great distress was to come upon Ariel: for the Lord has never spared the elect. Election gives him rights of discipline. We may inflict punishment upon those who are ours, when we may not lay the hand of chastisement upon those who do not belong to us. Love has its own law-court, but there is the open public market-place for the administration of common justice to those who are not ours by right of blood or love or pledged resolution of mutual loyalty.

Yet with all the distress there was a sense of protection. The close of the second verse does not read very rhythmically—

“Yet I will distress Ariel, and there shall be heaviness and sorrow: and it shall be unto me as Ariel.”

If we put one word into the last part of the verse that word will be key and explanation, light and relief at once,—namely, the word “yet”; then the latter part of the verse will read—“and yet it shall be unto me as Ariel,”—bleeding because of the rod, swallowed up and greatly distressed, yea, loaded with sorrow, it shall still be Jerusalem, it shall still be the darling of God. It is so with the whole world. God cannot leave it. He rends it with earthquakes, and comes back to seal up the chasms, to grow green beauty on the rips and rents which the terrific energy has made. He withdraws from the world for a year, and then comes back with two years at a time. It would seem as if he repented first,—as if love could not hold out, but must yield, at least make some approach in renewed goodness, in illuminated providence, if haply at the very last obstinacy may be subdued, and rebellion may be changed to loyalty. God is still conducting this ministry of approach and appeal and gracious offer. Behold, his hand is still stretched down out of heaven, and his fingers are laid upon the children of men.

What resources of humiliation God owns! Even Ariel was to be brought down, and was to speak out of the ground, and the speech of Ariel was to be low out of the dust, and the voice of



Ariel was to be, as one that hath a familiar spirit, out of the ground, and Ariel's speech was to be like a whisper out of the dust (ver. 4). The tone that was once so clarion-like, so musical, that was heard as might be heard the voice of silver bells, was to be sunk to a whisper, a sigh scarcely audible because of the gathering dust. See Ariel humiliated! To have seen her taken up and thrown away by Omnipotence would have been a spectacle not wholly without dignity; but to see sweet Ariel, the great lion-heart, or the word once significant of home and warmth and comfort and protection,—to see Ariel thrust away in the dust muttering like one half-buried from a grave half-filled, is humiliation hardly to be borne.

There were great assaults as well as great humiliations—

"Thou shalt be visited of the Lord of hosts with thunder, and with earthquake, and great noise, with storm and tempest, and the flame of devouring fire" (ver. 6).

Know the strength of the fortress by the instruments that are brought to bear upon it. This is not contempt; this is a tribute to the strength and dignity of Ariel. To overthrow Ariel you must not only have thunder and earthquake and storm and tempest and flame of devouring fire, but God must be the assaulting warrior: such weapons would fall out of other hands; in his alone are they mighty to the point of conquest. His arm would destroy the universe but for his heart. It is love that keeps omnipotence in check. Power belongeth unto thee, O Lord; also unto thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy.

The mercy soon comes in this chapter—

"And the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel, even all that fight against her and her munition, and that distress her, shall be as a dream of a night vision" (ver. 7).

Sennacherib, and all Assyrian hosts, and all evil-minded men, shall vanish as a dream dies at opening day—

"It shall even be as when an hungry man dreameth, and, behold, he eateth; but he awaketh, and his soul is empty: or as when a thirsty man dreameth, and, behold, he drinketh; but he awaketh, and, behold, he is faint, and his soul hath appetite" (ver. 8).

The hungry man was just going to seize the food, and he awoke

and found himself in a place of emptiness ; the thirsty man had all but clutched the vessel containing the water, and behold he awoke and the vessel was miles away : " so shall the multitude of all the nations be, that fight against mount Zion." And what is true of mount Zion is true of all good hearts. " No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper ; " men who hate thee shall be standing on the front doorstep, and they shall just be turning their heaviest gun upon thy castle, and they shall be in the very act of applying a light to the powder, and then they, and their light, and their powder, and their gun shall be blown out, and blown away. If God be for us, who can be against us ? One heart-prayer can bring more than twelve legions of angels to our help, if we be lovers of God, and if we have entrusted him with our life ; yea, though we have sinned, and slipped, and half-fallen, we shall be saved in our very reeling, and instead of falling leftward towards hell we shall fall rightward towards the altar, and in prayer our souls shall be delivered and saved. Men can do nothing against us. Let them criticise and rave and condemn, and deliver their anger and their malice with all appropriate fury, it all comes to nothing but to their own confusion. Blessed are they that trust God, that live in him, that have no life but in him, that never ask questions, but say, the Lord will direct, the Lord will provide ; if he will not tell me in the daytime what to do, he will whisper it when the lights are put out and when we are together, hardly distinguishable the one from the other, because of mutual approach, because of condescending heavens, and grateful, trustful earth. This is the spiritual life ; this is the divine life ; this is it what is meant by being hidden with God, closeted with Christ, identified with the very spirit of the universe. " All my springs are in thee."

Now comes a very modern passage. The very thing that we imagined to be original, and the latest discovery of folly, is written down here without cipher, in the plainest, directest English :—

" For the Lord hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and hath closed your eyes : the prophets and your rulers, the seers hath he covered. And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee : and he saith, I cannot ; for it is sealed : and

the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee : and he saith, I am not learned " (vers. 10-12).

Precisely the condition of religious civilisation to-day ! On the one hand, we have that agnosticism that will not know, and on the other the agnosticism that has never had the chance of instruction. See how the case stands. First of all, the book is delivered to one that is learned—learned in letters, in history, in philosophy, in science ; and the appeal is—"Read this, I pray thee : and he saith, I cannot ; for it is sealed ;" I cannot read anything about God, for it is a mystery impenetrable ; I cannot discover the secret of the universe, for it is sealed : we must not attempt to break the seal ; whatever mystery there is must be left ; let us confine ourselves to things we can handle, and properly appraise, and use under our own discretion, and let us leave alone sealed things, unknowable mysteries, doctrines that were never meant to have their equivalent in words. A wondrous thing indeed that this agnosticism should have been painted so vividly thousands of years ago ! The men to whom the appeal was made were learned men, the scribes and teachers of their day ; but they said, Here is a book which cannot be opened or read, for it is sealed : we must simply recognise its existence, and pass by it, leaving the opening and the solution as things quite beyond our immediate reach or understanding. This is what the most learned agnostic would say to-day to the humble inquirer who went to him with the question, What is God ? what is the future ? what is the destiny of man ? or what are the worlds that shine above us ? What is the meaning of spiritual inspiration, direction, government ? what is it that provides the food we eat ? or who kindles the light under which we do our work ?—what is there *beyond* ? He would say, "I cannot read it ; for it is sealed." The universe is like a musical instrument, he would continue—and herein we quote almost the very words of the agnostic himself—having so many keys : on the one hand you have all that is light, and lilting, and silvery, and cheerful ; and on the other all that is deep, and profound, and solemn, and heavy, and dark, and thunderous ; there between these points your arms may move, but beyond all is sealed. What, am I then seated on a stool, and have I nothing but arms that I can put out ? Have I no imagination, no dream

power, no speculation? Have I not at least something stirring within me which says, do not sit there; rise; use other faculties; the arms are but poor symbols of thy strength: thou art a soul, a spirit, a winged life; go and claim the inheritance of the morning and the estate of the summer. It would seem to be extremely humble—but there is a humility which no man believes—that one should say, I cannot read this history or answer this enigma; for it is sealed. Then the inquirer turns to those who are really ignorant, saying, “Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned.” He measures learning, however, by letters; he does not know that there is a learning which is independent of letters and forms, symbols and things that can be viewed spectacularly. There is a learning of the heart, and herein we find the sphere of inspired genius, inspired intuition—that marvellous instinct, sagacity, soul-power, which knows without having been to school. “How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?” There are people who never can get away from the idea that heaven is to be scaled by a ladder: they forget that there are wings. There are many ways to truth, to God, to rest, not known by those who live simply in the letter. When the Bible is fully opened, annotated from beginning to end as with light, it will be done by the meek soul, the modest spirit. He will see most who first excludes the visible: then by pureness of heart and simplicity of motive, he may see God.

The people are rebuked who turn things upside down. This is the teaching of the sixteenth verse. By turning things upside down is meant putting things into false relations, taking hold of things by the wrong end, confounding the potter with the clay, and instead of setting the vessel down setting the potter down. This is wise un wisdom, blind sagacity, the kind of intellectual audacity that leads to defiance, not to courage. Are there not men who are gifted with the genius of inversion—men who through satire, or love of sarcasm, or recklessness of mind, pervert and invert all the harmonies and purposes of God, violating divine proportions, and reversing eternal decrees, so far as their limited power will permit? Such men cannot read the Bible aright; they always open at the wrong place; they always fasten upon the wrong question. There are so many men

anxious to know who wrote the Pentateuch that they never read the book itself. There are so many persons who are profoundly busy in reading the address on the outside of the letter that they never open the envelope; they have been fighting for centuries about the envelope, and the address, and the local stamp, and wondering how old the postman was that stamped that letter, and what will become of him in two thousand years from this day; and the family is in contention and tumult and unrest; every morning that letter is produced to have the envelope rediscussed and the writing re-examined through the latest microscope that can be borrowed. Why not open the letter? It may contain something; it may be self-explanatory; there may be a banknote in it. Let us open the letter; let us read the Pentateuch; and if we find in it light, and music, and truth, and drama conforming to our own experience of life, we may be able by such a process to get back to all that is really valuable in authorship. The value is in the thing that is said, and not in the signature which it bears. If men would thus read the Bible, take hold of it by the right side, and take care never to turn it upside down, they would be able themselves to sign the book, and they might be forgiven if they said they had written the twenty-third psalm. We have all written it; that is to say, we would have written it had we been blessed with the genius of expression, for we have all felt it; so that when the divinely-gifted minstrel sang the psalm first in our hearing we said, Sing it again; that is what we have been waiting for: blessed art thou, for thou hast a necromancy in the use of words, and thou hast translated the dumb meaning of all souls. Thus we must seize the moral purpose of the Bible, and work from that purpose backward and forward into all related, to minor and comparatively insignificant, questions.

The prophet complains of people who made him "an offender for a word" (ver. 21). That is to say, they condemned him as unpatriotic because he pronounced publicly against the sins of the city. He intimates his public character in the peculiar expression in the twenty-first verse—"that reproveth in the gate." The literal meaning is that he was an open-air speaker. He could not be enclosed by walls; he could not be roofed in: he was an open-

air preacher,—a man whose pulpit was always ready, a man who required a great church, for he had a great message to deliver. It is precisely so to-day. Men are made offenders for a word in various ways, and not least in a moral way for being too critical upon their age. We love criticism only when it is directed to others. Yet are there not men who make prophets and preachers and poets and teachers offenders because of a word? The fault is a little one, but it is magnified, it is distorted, it is put in false lights, it is aggravated into a kind of burden of guilt. Do we not need open-air preachers? We do. But the climate is against us! We are quite willing to condemn the absentees, but who will stand on the steps of the Stock Exchange and say—Oh, generation of bloodsuckers, vipers, children of the devil! The only remedy for that is, alas, an indictment for nuisance! The prophet is dead, or if he be not dead he is in the wilderness, where he has abundance of open air but no audience. Who will say that Isaiah is an ancient prophet, that his prophecies are an ancient book? Jesus Christ quoted from them. Who can wonder that another said, "Esaïas is very bold"? He was bold because he knew his ground, he knew his age, he knew the truth he had to deliver, and knowledge of truth gives a man confidence as knowledge of language does. He who knows the language he speaks, speaks in all companies with perfect confidence and therefore with perfect ease. It is the uncertain grammarian that sits in silence, or picks his way daintily and inoffensively over commonplaces which nobody can remember. The prophet who knows the language of God—in other terms, the truth and purpose of God—speaks at the gate, in the open air, by night, by day, in the long summer, in the cold winter, and his cry is magnified because his conviction is strong.



## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, we are saved by hope. In the spirit of hope we live and work and suffer. Hope destroys time and distance and hindrance, and brings thee near to us with sacred realisation. We have the things we hope for when we hope according to thy will; we are already in heaven, though we know it not, when we do thy bidding and follow all the spirit of the blessed Christ. We have our reward; we have it now, in beginning, and sign, and hint; we shall have it wholly, in the absoluteness of its perfection, in thine own due time, when we obey the summons to arise because the Master is come and waiteth for us. Thou hast spoken comfortably unto our hearts in many voices, in many tones, in thy providence day by day, in all the miracle of our poor human life which thou hast brought onward from stage to stage unto this present, raising us up from many dejections, leading us forth from many humiliations, and giving us unexpected strength and unlooked-for delight. But what hast thou done in the Cross of Jesus Christ thy Son but shown all the miracles of eternity, all the wonders of almightiness, all the glory and wealth of heaven? We gaze upon that Cross, and our eyes are filled with tears; we look again, and our eyes are charged with light; we look again, and behold whilst we look the dying One lives and gives life, and is already more than conqueror. May we live in the spirit of Christ, then we shall have daily comfort; may we be crucified with Christ, then we can have no other pain; may we lean our little crosses against the tree on which he bore his woe. Amen.

## Chapter xxix. 11, 12.

"And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed: and the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned."

## THE UNREAD VISION.

SO the vision remains unread. There are two roads to this insuperable and invincible "cannot." We are always breaking our heads against that granite "cannot." Surely the learned man can do it? He says, No: I could read it if somebody else would break the seal, but the book is sealed; I cannot get at it, my learning is not available. Then take it to the ignorant man:



he says, I have the poetic faculty, I can idealise, but as for reading, I do not know even letters, much less syllables, I am no scholar ; if you want anything out of my own consciousness, you can have it, but as to reading a vision written by Isaiah or Jeremiah or flaming Ezekiel, it is all mist and cloud to me ; the writing has no shape. All writing is alike to ignorance. Then has it come to this ? Yes, exactly to this, in our age, in the Church, in the family. Here we have one man saying, I can read, but I cannot break seals : and another saying, I could break the seal, but it would be useless, for having broken the seal the page would just be one blur to my unlearned eyes ; I cannot read. To this has the vision of God come in our day !

This is the Lord's doing. Is the Lord to be credited or discredited with this "cannot" ? Yes :—

"For the Lord hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and hath closed your eyes: the prophets and your rulers, the seers hath he covered" (ver. 10).

Is God responsible for all this inability to read the vision ? Yes. This is the problem which has perplexed many. God does a thing, it is said, and then blames man for doing it : where is the reason, where is the justice ? God hardens the heart, and then blames Pharaoh because his heart is hardened : God sends upon men the spirit of deep sleep, and then mocks them because they are not awake. These things would drive our faith away if we did not practise them ourselves. It hath pleased God so to make us that we rehearse on a small scale all the drama of the universe. We are the great mysteries ; we need not trouble ourselves about the mysteriousness of the Deity so long as we are confronted by the mysteriousness of our own constitution. How is God responsible ? Because it hath pleased him to set us within a scheme of things. God does not make the laws from day to day ; he made the laws before he made the world : the atonement was rendered before the sin was committed. God does not extemporise justice. Herein is the very glory of civilisation, and the jurisprudence which comes out of it, that the magistrate is not left to settle the sentence at the time. If it were so who could control his passion, his anger, sometimes his just and righteous emotion, in the presence of flagrant outrage, bitter and

Satanic injustice. The magistrate hears the case, and then looks into the book to know what the sentence has to be—not as to days and hours, but as to the maximum penalty:—"not exceeding," "not more than." How, otherwise, would our incensed justice rage, and extemporise great vindictive retributions for the enormities of men! This is the very pattern of the heavens. The atonement was rendered before the sin was committed: the law was made before the violator of the law was born. Therein is the responsibility of sovereignty; that is what we mean by the monarchy and the rule of God. Things are so made that if a man shall drink a certain quantity of a certain species of liquid he will burn with fever. Who is the author of that fever? God,—blessed be his name. Who made that hell? The Lord made it,—blessings be upon the beneficence of his throne. Is the Lord responsible for that burning brow, and rending headache, that fevered current of the blood? Yes, it is God who is responsible.

We live in a constructed universe, not in a desolate chaos. We are at liberty to build within certain lines, but we cannot transgress the greater geometry. We think we are building when we are only playing at toy-houses. All building was done before we began to disport ourselves in the quarries and in the forests of the earth: the geometry was settled before the stones were put together by human hands. Who is responsible for the fallen wall? God. Why is he responsible for the wall that has fallen? Because he is the Author of the true geometry; he has so constructed the universe that if we do not walk and work according to all his provisions our walls will tumble down, and every tumbling stone is a tribute to the throne of God. Do not suppose that you are little accidents, occasional appearances and disappearances on the surface of the earth; do not imagine that you are the mere sport of the statistician and the census-taker; you are here because God is Lord and Ruler. The Lord reigneth; he fixeth the bounds of our habitation; we say we will live here or there, and we will hasten to yonder city, and we call this liberty. In a narrow, subordinate sense, convenient for the interchange of human promise and opinion, this is true; yet it is only part of the truth: the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Men misuse or

disuse their religious faculties, drink themselves into stupidity, lose their sensitiveness: this is the divine law; God is responsible. He is responsible for the law. He will not—he cannot—change it. We are constituted that we cannot allow a limb to fall into desuetude, and retain its vigour. Who is responsible for the numbness, the paralysis? God is. He has not made a law we can play with; he did not make the law merely for the sake of making it; law expresses himself: and God is love. Who is responsible for this issue? Man is. But you have just said that God is responsible. That is true; and so is man. You can start the argument from either of two points; you must neither exclude the divine nor the human:—"Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men: Therefore" — (vers. 13, 14). That is precisely how this mysterious life stands. Can there be evil in the city, and the Lord not have done it? No. Can there be evil in the city, and man be held guiltless? No: God did it; man did it; these would be irreconcilable paradoxes in words: we come down upon their meaning through the agony, the shame, the disappointment, and occasionally the joy of our lives. Experience keeps her school: life is its own university.

Here, then, we have men representing two classes. The learned man has been making too much of his learning. He would rest upon it; he would be his own deity: and the Lord says, This cannot be, and "Therefore . . . the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid." You have put the lamp in the wrong place; you have endeavoured to supersede the sun: what shall I do to you? O vain, vain soul, what shall I do? this will I do, I will blow out your candle. There comes a point when it is useless to reason with men; they are neither above the line of argument nor below it; they are wholly outside of it, it has no relation to them: the only thing left even for God's almightiness to do is to blow out the artificial flame. So great men become imbeciles, men who yesterday governed the world are to-day asking little children to help them across the busy thoroughfare,

for a sudden dizziness has seized their heads ; men who yesternight presided at the board and dictated the policy of the consultation, are this morning asking what day of the week it is. What has happened—an earthquake ? No ; some subtle action has taken place in the brain : the inner eyes are dull of sight. See these wise men reel ; they have been early at their cups to-day, they must have been sitting up overnight and drinking deep. No, they are quite sober ; yet they are drunk—they are drunk, but not with wine. The Lord keeps us all under him : beyond there is no finite power ; it is in the under-world that finiteness plays its little game of invention and rushes upon its blasphemy of trying to be infinite. Here, then, is a responsibility on the one side divine and on the other side wholly human. It is a law fixed by God. “Whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him.” Who made the hedge ? God. Who made the serpent ? God. Who made the serpent bite just at that moment ? God. Who broke through the hedge ? Man. It is a marvellous education, a mixed and manifold discipline, full of eccentricity and self-contradiction, and yet ending in reconciliation, if not literal, yet experiential, attested by the judgment and the conscience of men.

The inabilities and confusions of the world are of man's creating. We have spoiled our faculties, we have blinded ourselves by indulgence, we have stupefied ourselves by excesses ; and now the quality of men reveals itself. *In vino veritas*, and in this other drink that is not wine there is also truth. Having risen from the banqueting of self-indulgence what happens ? Two things. How does the banqueting tell upon the learned man ? He says, “I cannot.” How does it tell upon the ignorant man ? He says, “I cannot.” Can neither of you do this thing ? No : but you are two totally different men. Yes, but this banqueting and rioting develops the quality of each, and the learned man is as the fool, and the fool is as the learned man ; and the wisdom of God remains unread. Why palter about the diversity of the roads when they both come to the same point ? Self-degradation is the answer. We have taken things into our own hands, and therefore we are drunken but not with wine ; we stagger but not with strong drink. God will not have us share

his throne. We cannot be both God and men. We must know our place, and our place is that of scholars; our disposition should be that which says, Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth. To that disposition God never returned any answer but the reply of love. Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye cannot see the kingdom of God. You may even be talking about it without seeing it. The age is cursed with sermons about the Gospel. We do not want to hear anything more "about" the Gospel, we want to hear the Gospel itself.

Then our hope is not in the learned man as such, nor is our hope in the unlearned man. There are persons who will tell you that the pulpit is enfeebled because of the learning that is in it now, the literal learning; the brain of the pulpit is overloaded with literature; the references to literature are all displays of intellectual vanity, and therefore we must turn to the simple, the unlearned, and the ignorant. Very good; let us go to them: will you read us the vision of God? The answer is, if they be honest men, We cannot read it. When learning has drunk itself into stupidity by the wine of its own vanity, and when ignorance has done the same thing, taking refuge in indolence rather than accepting the discipline of industry, genius and stupidity confront one another at the same point, and say, What! you here? Yes! both here, both fools.

All this accounts for the religious weakness and powerlessness of the times. We have not sufficiently waited upon God; we have not lived and moved, and had our being in the Cross. We have become an inventive Church. We must, at least, have now nearly five-and-twenty different theories of every doctrine supposed to be contained in the Bible. There is the catechism view, with proof and without proofs, mainly the latter; there is the trust-deed view, in which some man has been paid so much in silver and pence for writing out the faith of God's own heart, minting the thought of infinity into phrases that have been engrossed and docketed in chancery. We have trusted too much to mechanism, and too little to simple childlike faith in God; we have placed upon the mountains of knowledge and progress and holiness a number of whitewashed posts, and we have said,

Follow these posts, and inquire when you get to the last of them where you are. All this means that the vision is being lost. The real reading, the poetical, idealistic, spiritual meaning, the moral penetration, the function of conscience, the prerogative of sanctified judgment, all the noblest aspects and powers of man are being subordinated to these little tricks of management and vanity, these little bubbles of ambition. Is it not well to have a post or two on the mountains? Under some circumstances, yes; but when there is a living Guide to take you home, you trust to the life and not the timber. We are living in the reign and dispensation of God the Holy Ghost. How seldom do we hear him referred to! We hear much exclamation about preaching Christ; we uphold that exclamation with the vehemence of the most excited love; but such preaching is impossible apart from the direct and continual action of God the Holy Ghost. Who are the men that run down anything that is really spiritual, even if it be an imposture or misconception of spirituality? The men whom we have most difficulty in convincing that there is a spiritual universe are professing Christians. Of course the whole spiritual conception of things has been debased, impoverished, dishonoured; there have been quacks and impostors innumerable in the interpretation of spiritual realities. Who ought to preserve that great department of thought, and secure it as far as possible from invasion and violation? Christian teachers. Do not let imposture cheat you out of your inheritance. What you have heard of spiritualism or debased spirituality may be lies from beginning to end, and probably is; but that ought not to quench your faith in the fact that God is a Spirit, and that we are now under the dispensation of the Holy Ghost.

There is only one cure for this loss of faith, and that cure is in two things, leading to a third, penitence. That old word penitence is dropping into disuse. In a letter recently received a man said: "When people are converted (whatever that may mean)." It was a fool's parenthesis; every man ought to know what converted means. We know it in politics, we know it in art, we ought to know it also in the soul. "Converted"—why it means turned round, turned up, turned Godward. "Whatever that may mean"—thou poor simpleton, if



not thou meaner knave ; it means change in soul, life, thought, purpose, point of vision, point of aspiration, and range of service. The penitence will go when the word conversion goes. Penitence ought to mean broken-heartedness, shame on account of sin, bitterness of soul because of the broken law, self-renunciation, self-repudiation. Then after penitence will come obedience. Oh, the sweetness of obedience ! that is the great scholar ; obedience has all the certificates of heaven, obedience wins all the prizes of God. If we could be obedient we should have great visions every day above the brightness of the sun. If we would know the doctrine we must do the will ; some things come to us in the act of doing them ; our doing is very imperfect, but still it is doing, it is action ; we are on the way towards the happy conclusion. If you would understand the Cross you must first die upon it. Oh, thou who hast not tasted the agony, do not try to preach the Gospel ! Words of passion on lips of ice are the basest blasphemy against God and man. First go, be reconciled to God through Christ ; then come, and with the music of thankful love tell us what his face is like : hath he marks to lead us to him, if he be our Guide ? and you will say, "In his feet and hands are wound-prints, and his side," and we shall know then that thou hast been in communion with the Cross.

Out of penitence and out of obedience will come self-distrust. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. We shall then know how to read the Bible. Many men can only parse it ; they think parsing is reading. You begin Milton's "Paradise Lost" by parsing it, and you will never touch the music. The parsing is right, no man has a word to say against grammar, but do keep them both in their own places ; above all that is literal, wooden, mechanical, and essential to human convenience—above all that, there is light. What is light ? No man knows. Love—what is love ? No man knows. Music—what is music ?—Music !



## Chapter xxix. 13.

"This people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me."

### PLAIN SPEAKING.

LET us use these words as Jesus Christ used them in Matthew (xv. 7), "Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you." There are three points,—the first of which is the importance of plain speaking on all questions affecting the interests of truth. Jesus Christ was pre-eminently a plain speaker. He did not round his sentences for the purpose of smoothing his way. When he had occasion to administer rebuke or to point out the errors of those who were round about him, he spoke keenly, incisively, with powerful effect upon the mind and conscience of those who heard him. In his speech we find many hard words, many sayings which would not be accounted courteous. He called men "blind leaders," "fools," "vipers," "whited sepulchres," and other names equally descriptive of moral deformity. He never appears to have used these names with hesitation or misgiving, but pronounced them as if they were the right names and were rightly distributed to the parties who heard him speak. He calls certain persons "hypocrites." He does not say behind their backs that they were hypocrites, but he looked straight at them and right through them, and said, "Ye hypocrites." If we had more such plain speaking it would be a great advantage. It must, however, be understood that as between man and man, where there is plain speaking on the one side there must be liberty of equal plainness on the other. Plain speaking must not be played at as a game of mere skill or chance; it must proceed upon distinct moral convictions, and come out of a sincere piety, a deep reverence for all that is holy, beautiful, good. Plain speaking, thus arising and thus applied, would become one of the most influential agents in the purification of our social

intercourse. Many men speak plainly, but they speak their plain words so that the right individual may have no opportunity of hearing them. There are some men who are very courageous when the enemy is far away. There are many persons who imagine that they have actually spoken plainly to the individuals who have been hypocritical and false when they have told their friends, in a semi-confidential tone, that they very nearly said so-and-so. It is in this way we play with our consciousness. We think that if we have very nearly said it, and told somebody else how nearly we did say it, that we have actually gone nine-tenths of the way of saying it and of defending righteousness and truth. We know very well when men speak to us hypocritically. Alas, what skill we have attained in withholding the word of condemnation under such circumstances! Were we courageous, were we equal to the occasion, we should soon put an end to a good deal of the common hypocrisy of the world.

There is probably no man who would not applaud sincerity; yet when we come to apply sincerity, we all quail before it and protest against it. It is so in the exposition of divine truth. The preacher may say in general terms to all the world, "You are sinners before God," and he would be declared to be laying down sound doctrine. But if he were to lay his hand upon any one man and say, "You are a bad man," he would be charged with rudeness. We can sit and hear the world condemned; but when all this generality is narrowed down to a personal application—without which application the doctrine is simply sounding brass—we begin to complain that we have been rudely treated. We grow more and more away from the candour which underlies and beautifies all truly sincere speech. We begin in childhood with wonderful candour, beautiful simplicity of intercourse, and we grow away from that into conventionality and artificialism; and he is the clever man who can best conceal himself. Jesus Christ spoké plainly. He spoke all that was in his heart concerning wickedness to the people themselves, and thus he was often misunderstood and ill-treated. The disciples came to him and said, "Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying?" People have come to us with the self-same reproach, and we have been cowardly enough to regret our

plainness of speech. If we have spoken directly to a man, and have heard afterwards that he was "offended," we have blamed ourselves. We have a right so to blame ourselves if the speech came out of an evil spirit, but in so far as it was spoken with the dignity of truth and the consciousness of innocence it ought not to have occasioned even a momentary pang of self-reproach.

Two things are required in the plain speaker. Personal rightness. "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone." We have nothing to do with the hypocrisies which may exist between other people, except in so far as we know them personally; but when hypocrisy is practised upon ourselves, then the scathing word of truth may be spoken. More, however, than personal rightness is needed: there must also be moral fearlessness. Our courage is not always equal to our convictions. We know the right, and yet dare not pursue it. The right word suggests itself to our lips, and our lips dare not pronounce it. What manner of persons ought we to be who profess Christ? We are not discussing common laws of social courtesy and common intercourse. We are now asking ourselves in Christ's presence, and in the presence of his great Cross, what ought to be our sincerity, transparency, reality, as the bearers of his gracious name? If we dabble in immoral excuses, if we shuffle and wriggle, what can we expect of men who profess nothing higher than common courtesy and common conventional relationship as between man and man? Yet this is a most difficult point to carry into practice, because we may show a hypocritical love of the right; our very plainness of speech may come out of a subtle hypocrisy; and we may think to get ourselves reputation for honesty by speaking coarsely to other people. It is no easy matter this, and nothing can help us to do it with dignity and tenderness and self-distrust, with modesty and trembling, and yet with emphasis, but the indwelling, all-sanctifying Holy Ghost!

Notice the far-seeing spirit of prophecy. Jesus Christ said to the men of his day, "Esaias prophesied of you." Esaias prophesied hundreds of years before they lived. Jesus Christ says

to the men of his day, "Esaias had you in his eye." Observe the unity of the moral world; observe the unchangeableness of God's laws; see how right is ever right and wrong is ever wrong; how the centuries make no difference in the quality of righteousness, and fail to work any improvement in the deformity of evil. If any man would see himself as he really is, let him look into the mirror of Holy Scripture. God's book never gets out of date, because it deals with eternal principles and covers the necessities of all mankind. Let us then study the word of God more closely. No man can truly know human nature, who does not read two Bibles,—namely, the Bible of God as written in the Holy Scriptures, and the Bible of God as written in his own heart and conscience. Human nature was never so expounded as it is expounded in holy writ. No man ever comes to this book without feeling that his particular case—in all the minuteness of its detail, in all the subtlety of its mystery—has been dealt with by the holy writers. We praise other books because of the knowledge of human nature which they display, and we are right in making them one standard of our admiration and applause. We delight in a writer's power of analysing human nature, human feeling, human conduct. We say, "He knows human nature thoroughly." Therefore such writers get hold of us and carry us away captive, and rightly so. If that be a true standard of judgment at all, I bind men who have not lost all candour and all simplicity to look at the Bible in the light of their own standard. The Bible exposes the very innermost recesses of human nature; sets a light where no other hand ever placed a candle; lights up the pathways of our most secret life and thought; and we begin to feel that the first book we must shut up when we are going to do evil is God's Book. This is the great hold, the sovereign mastery, which the Book of God has over the ages,—that it knows us, that it gives articulation to our dumb reproaches, that it puts into the best words the things which we reap against ourselves and cannot fully explain. Esaias knew us; Jeremiah has analysed and dissected and anatomised us. If any man would know the human heart, he must read the human heart in God's Book.

Notice the high authority of the righteous censor. When Jesus

Christ spoke in this case he did not speak altogether in his own name. He used the name of Esaias. All time is on the side of the righteous man ; all history puts weapons into the hands of the man who would be valiant for truth. The righteous man does not draw his authority from yesterday. The credentials of the righteous man are not written with ink that is hardly dry yet. It draws from all the Past. A good man does not stand alone in his good works. The man who comes to teach truth brings a great multitude with him. The glorious company of the apostles, the goodly fellowship of the prophets, the noble army of martyrs ! We are little in ourselves, in our individuality ; looked at in our simple personality, we are not worthy a moment's consideration. But the man who lifts up his voice for truth and right speaks with the sound of mighty thunderings and the impressiveness of many waters. Young preachers of the gospel, believe this. It is not your little bit of paper that you are depending upon as your authority when you enter the pulpit. Teachers of the young,—parents, in your family education,—business men, in your commercial relations,—honourable souls of all kinds, believe this :—When you speak a right word, the prophets speak through you, the apostles prolong the strain, and the grand old martyrs seal it with their blood ! Thus the tiniest instrument in God's hand becomes a match for walled cities and fortified hosts and men who set themselves against the Lord and against his anointed. You are poor in number now, meagre in agency ; but they that are for you are more than they that are against you. You seem to be alone, but you are not alone. Esaias is looking over your shoulder ; Jeremiah is saying, "Be emphatic ;" martyrs are crying, "Play the man for truth ;" all history says, "Do not fail : this is a crisis ; the right word now is a battle won." Speak it ! "Be thou like the heroic Paul ; if thou hast a truth to utter, speak it boldly, speak it all !"

The men whom Jesus Christ condemned were outwardly very good looking men. For example, they were very technical. They said, "The disciples do not wash their hands ; this is a very sad business, and must be inquired into. They were very particular in saying how often it was to be done, which hand

was to be uppermost, and how the evolution was to proceed. They were also a very critical set of men; they criticised the disciples. They were not shame-faced about their technicality; they went right up to the Master and said, "How is this?" There was courage in the men. They had a complaint, and they spoke it out clearly. Then they had great reverence; strong veneration for traditional practices, traditional customs. They did not like the Past to be altogether ignored and dishonoured; they spoke in the name of the elders. So the men were not altogether bad. They were technical, they were critical, they were traditional. Jesus turned upon them this bolt of thunder, "Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?" They never took our Lord unawares. He never had to ask for time to find a suitable weapon. He was clothed with the whole armour of God. Touch him anywhere, and his answer was instantaneous and complete. So with us. We may be technical. We may like to see the order of divine service pursued in a certain way,—first singing, then reading, then praying, then singing, then preaching. We are strong upon these points. But what if we can go home and do a sneaking action? We may be critical. We may say the preacher's grammar was not very exact; the singing was not scientific,—there was a good deal of flatness and somewhat of discrepancy in the way in which the psalmody was conducted. Up to that point we are noble men. But what if we oppress the hireling and lay a heavy hand on the weak? We are fond of traditions. We like to talk about that "dear old minister" that died about fifty years ago; and that "nice old Christian friend" that used to do so many beautiful things. We have a great reverence for these men and their way of doing things. But what if to-morrow morning we speak a savage word to a lonely creature, and drive into despair some soul that would be thankful for one ray of light? Away with our technicality and criticism and tradition, if we are not sound at the core, right and true to great principles! Let us beware lest we strain at a gnat and swallow a camel.

Then what is to be our help in all this matter of reality? Jesus Christ must be the help of our souls. He who spoke plainly must teach us to speak plainly; he who set the example



must give us strength. And he will do it. We are not to speak as if we ourselves were infallible, and other people were guilty sinners. We are not to take upon us any air that savours of self-righteousness and self-satisfaction. When we speak plainly we are to speak tenderly. "Consider thyself, lest thou also be tempted." We are not to treat all men alike; we are to discriminate; we are to make a difference. On some we are to have compassion; to some men we are to speak as the lightning would speak, if it could open its lips, in the name of God; to others we are to speak as the dew would speak, could it tell all that is in its pure heart. We are to argue with some men with sternness of tone, and we are to speak to others with heart-breaking pathos. Tears are to be the secret of our power; forbearance is to be our secret of influence; and moderation is to do what exaggeration could never accomplish. We thus need a wise and understanding heart to know what to say, and especially to know how to say it, because we may ruin our cause by a tone!

What, then, are we to do? We are to study Jesus Christ. "Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart." We are to copy his example, not only in its dignity and power and lustre, but in its condescension, humility, gentleness, tearfulness, and infinite kindness. There is a way of administering reproach which misses its very object; there is a way of speaking the right word which turns it, for all practical purposes, into the wrong word. So, then, it must be to Christ we come, and in Christ's school we study. Lord, help us to speak from the height of thy Cross! Knowing the mystery of love in thy love, may our lips say the right word in the right way, and thus save souls from death and turn many to righteousness!



## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, we thank thee that we have not come unto the mount that might not be touched and that burned with fire, and unto lightnings and thunders and tempests: we have come unto Mount Zion, the hill of Zion, the sacred place; drawn to it by the persuasion of thy love, hastening to it because of our need of rest. We thank thee that we live under the dispensation of thy Spirit. Now we hear the still small voice that our hearts can listen to in the darkness; and hear every tone of thy word. We have come unto the general assembly and church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven. We rejoice that we are here. We bless thee that thou dost speak to us without the trumpet of the thunder. Thou hast a word for them that are weary and are ill at ease, and thou dost speak it silently, tenderly, graciously, so much so that thy very utterance is itself a promise and a benediction. Speak to us every one. Show us all thy will. Reveal thy commandments unto us, and show that, by thy grace, by the help of thy Holy Spirit, the yoke of Christ is easy and his burden is light. Thus shall thy commandments become our song in the house of our pilgrimage; in law we shall find rest; in the bidding of thy commandments we shall find the beginning of mercy; the deeper meaning of things will be revealed to us,—yea, by the pureness of heart wrought in us by God the Holy Ghost, we shall see God. For this vision we long; it will give brightness of view to all other things, and rightness of value; it will show us that our light affliction is but for a moment, that our pilgrimage is but one short day's walk. O show us thyself!—not in the intolerable splendour of thy glory, but in the tenderness of thy providence, the goodness of thy dealing with us day by day; and with these visions before our soul we shall know no more the pain of anxiety, the torment of distress, but shall rest in the Lord, waiting patiently for him, and in walking in the way of thy commandments, be they great or small, we shall find peace unto our souls. We have no hope in our own prayer; we mingle it with the intercession of the One Priest, we commit it to the mystery of the mediation of Jesus Christ himself; and as the Cross is our altar, and our Saviour is our Advocate, we are assured of thy reply, thy great AMEN.

## Chapter xxx.

1. Woe to the rebellious children [not to be read in a harsh tone, but rather as if it were, "alas, for the rebellious children:" into such vocatives does God put the expression of his pity], saith the Lord, that take counsel, but not of me [they go to the wrong spring for water, and find it poison]; and that cover with a covering, but not of my spirit [with tow that can be burned up], that they may add sin to sin [in quick and pestilent evolution]:

2. That walk to go down into Egypt [that place of fascination], and have not asked at my mouth; to strengthen themselves in the strength of Pharaoh, and to trust in the shadow of Egypt! [Even to this does beauteous, high-minded Hezekiah come: "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."]

3. Therefore shall the strength of Pharaoh be your shame, and the trust in the shadow of Egypt your confusion.

4. For his princes were at Zoan [where Pharaoh had his court, and Moses wrought; one of the oldest cities in Egypt], and his ambassadors came to Hanes.

5. They were all ashamed of a people that could not profit them, nor be an help nor profit, but a shame, and also a reproach. [For they could not understand their language, and thought their very eloquence was mockery. You want a burden from the Lord, an oracle from on high? You shall have one; and this is the heading thereof.]

6. The burden of the beasts of the south [that is your oracle: take it; make the most of it]: into the land of trouble and anguish, from whence come the young and old lion, the viper and fiery flying serpent [all emblems of Egypt], they will carry their riches upon the shoulders of young asses, and their treasures upon the bunches of camels, to a people that shall not profit them [they shall sow the wind and reap the whirlwind: God is not mocked].

7. For the Egyptians shall help in vain [help in nothingness; shall draw water with a sieve, and put money into bags with holes in them], and to no purpose [for the night will find them no farther on than the morning: all time fights against the wrongdoer]: therefore have I cried concerning this, Their strength is to sit still [the great mouth is to be silenced].

8. ¶ Now go, write it before them in a table, and note it in a book [for here the prophet feels that he is not talking to a locality, but to a world; not to a day, but to all duration and time: set it down, chronicle it], that it may be for the time to come for ever and ever [how poetry itself gives out when it would measure duration!]:

9. That this is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the Lord [but any other law that lays no burden upon them, imposes no discipline upon them, does not tone their flaccid lives to tension with a view to the utterance of music]:

10. Which say to the seers, See not [shut your eyes]; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things [straight, direct things], speak unto us smooth things [inanimate things, round, polished nothings], prophecy deceits [flatter us, cover our tongues, like your own, with butter and oil]:

11. Get you out of the way, turn aside out of the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us. [Holiness is always hateful to wickedness: get rid of holiness, and then we shall have all hell to play in.]

12. Wherefore thus saith the Holy One of Israel [the very name which you yourselves have uttered], because ye despise this word, and trust in oppression and perverseness, and stay thereon:

13. Therefore this iniquity shall be to you as a breach ready to fall, swelling out in a high wall, whose breaking cometh suddenly at an instant. [First the bursting plaster, then the bulging wall, then the crash, and then the chaos.]

14. And he shall break it as the breaking of the potters' vessel that is broken in pieces [he shall not be content with that]; he shall not spare: so that there shall not be found in the bursting of it a sherd [a small piece of earthenware, or porcelain] to take fire from the hearth, or to take water withal out of the pit. [Men shall not only be broken, they shall be pulverised: so grindeth God's mills!]

15. For thus saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel; In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength: and ye would not.

16. But ye said, No; for we will flee upon horses [Ye babes! you long for horses as children long for toys: you shall have horses, innumerable horses; but they shall not be to charge with, they shall be to flee away upon]; therefore shall ye flee [your honour shall be turned to discredit: the swiftness of your horse shall in very deed be its value, for you shall have but one purpose, and that is to run away]: and, We will ride upon the swift; therefore shall they that pursue you be swift [there shall be horses enough].

17. One thousand shall flee at the rebuke of one; at the rebuke of five shall ye flee: till ye be left as a beacon [a pine; a solitary ill-grown tuft] upon the top of a mountain, and as an ensign [a poor little fluttering flag showing itself on the background of the sky] on a hill.

18. ¶ And therefore will the Lord wait [in silence], that he may be gracious unto you, and therefore will he be exalted [away, far into the heavens, and where all is silent], that he may have mercy upon you: for the Lord is a God of judgment [that is, a God of righteousness]: blessed are all they that wait for him.

19. For the people shall dwell in Zion at Jerusalem [love must repeat its favourite names: Zion was Jerusalem, Jerusalem was Zion, for all the purposes of this prophecy: unite the words, and say, "Dwell in Zion—Jerusalem": thou shalt weep no more: he will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee.

20. And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity [that is, the bread of scantiness], and the water of affliction [that is, not water enough to cool your parched tongues], yet shall not thy teachers be removed into a corner any more, but thine eyes shall see thy teachers:

21. And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee [mysterious, ghostly word], saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left.

22. Ye shall defile also the covering of thy graven images of silver, and the ornament of thy molten images of gold [there shall be a way found for the spoiling of precious metals: God will discover a way by which silver shall be turned into pewter and gold into common mud that no man will touch]: thou shalt cast them away as a menstruous cloth; thou shalt say unto it, Get thee hence.

23. Then shall he give the rain of thy seed, that thou shalt sow the ground withal; and bread of the increase of the earth, and it shall be fat and plenteous: in that day shall thy cattle feed in large pastures.

24. The oxen likewise and the young asses that ear the ground shall eat clean provender [the very finest mash that can be used for cattle food; not

inferior barley, but winnowed grain], which hath been winnowed with the shovel and with the fan. [Not only shall the higher cattle eat this food, but the young asses, the very *ne plus ultra* of abundance.]

25. And there shall be upon every high mountain, and upon every high hill, rivers and streams of waters in the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. [Fountains shall be upon the hills; there shall be rivers and pools in high places; all levels shall be altered: God hath undertaken to provide plentifully.]

26. Moreover the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day that the Lord bindeth up the breach of his people, and healeth the stroke of their wound.

27. ¶ Behold, the name of the Lord cometh from far, burning with his anger, and the burden thereof is heavy: his lips are full of indignation, and his tongue as a devouring fire:

28. And his breath, as an overflowing stream, shall reach to the midst of the neck, to sift the nations with the sieve of vanity [that is, with the sieve of nothingness]: and there shall be a bridle in the jaws of the people, causing them to err. [They like the devil: unto the devil they shall fly as on swift steeds; the bridle shall pull them towards their loved perdition: a strong delusion shall be sent upon them to believe a lie.]

29. Ye shall have a song, as in the night when a holy solemnity is kept; and gladness of heart, as when one goeth with a pipe to come into the mountain of the Lord, to the mighty One of Israel.

30. And the Lord shall cause his glorious voice to be heard [full of health, and music, and jubilation, and gospel], and shall shew the lighting down of his arm, with the indignation of his anger, and with the flame of a devouring fire, with scattering, and tempest, and hailstones. [He shall disclose all his attributes in one tremendous apocalypse.]

31. For through the voice of the Lord shall the Assyrian be beaten down, which smote with a rod.

32. And in every place where the grounded staff shall pass, which the Lord shall lay upon him, it shall be with tabrets and harps: and in battles of shaking will he fight with it. [The battles of swinging: the Lord's arm shall swing to and fro, and every time he swings it he will destroy the adversary.]

33. For Tophet [the valley of Hinnom, outside Jerusalem] is ordained of old [was meant to be a receptacle for refuse]; yea, for the king [of Asher, the proud king of Assyria] it is prepared; he hath made it deep and large: the pile thereof is fire and much wood [there shall be no want of fuel when the Lord shall burn his enemies]; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, doth kindle it. [O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord!]

### THE SOURCE OF STRENGTH.

THERE is a strange expression in the seventh verse, namely, "Their strength is to sit still." Innumerable sermons of very wise counsel and tender comfort have been preached from

these words, and will probably be preached from them until the end of time. The sermons have been excellent in inspiration and most beneficent in purpose, and have no doubt tended to cool irregular passion, and irrational energy that would insist upon doing something when there was really nothing to be done. Men have been exhorted to sit still, to take nothing into their own hands, to allow the divine will to operate according to the mystery of its own purpose and issue; and all such exhortations can be justified by many passages of Scripture, and can be confirmed by many volumes of experience. Unfortunately, the sermons have no connection whatever with this text. Most people would care nothing for that, because many people hear neither the text nor the discourse, but only little portions of each, which they almost instantly forget. Provided the sermon itself is full of comfort, what need is there to inquire whether it has any vital connection with the subject. There is no comfort in this text; there is no exhortation to patience and self-control in this mocking word. This is a political sarcasm—what we might term in modern language a political squib. There is no religion in a passage out of which rivers of religion have been extracted! Sometimes a policy is summed up in an epigram, or in an easily-quotable sentence; and it can be used as a war-cry or as an election-cry; it can be adapted to political uses of many sorts. Thus it was said of the Bourbons that “they forgot nothing, and remembered nothing.” It was said of an illustrious statesman in Europe that his policy was “blood and iron.” In relation to many persons we are recommended to use “masterly inactivity”—to be appearing capable of doing miracles, and yet to take infinite care not to attempt the performance of one of them. This is precisely the spirit of the text. The peoples to whom the words were addressed were mocked, and the paraphrase which the spirit of the text would justify is this:—They have great mouths, but say nothing; the hippopotamus cannot make his voice heard; the ox-mouth is closed: their energy is inaction; when they are about to come forward to do wonders they shrink back and do nothing. It is a taunt—an exclamation wholly ironical, thrown in the face of a detested enemy, or an absconding friend, or one who has great appearance of energy, and yet is unable to move the tiniest of his fingers. It is always important to be perfectly sure of the



meaning of the text. Having exhausted the grammatical meaning, it is open to preachers and teachers to accommodate their text to other uses : but the fact of accommodation should be broadly set forth, lest the divine oracles be perverted, and men come under the condemnation of that which we have seen in the twenty-ninth chapter, namely, of turning things upside down. It is perfectly true that our strength is often to sit still. It is a truth which we have confirmed ourselves in many an instance after we have done everything by doing nothing. To have attained this pitch of discipline is to have advanced very far in the course of Christian education. Who does not like to be doing something ? Impatience cries, Issue a manifesto ; make a deliverance ; publish a contradiction ; be up and doing. It is a poor exhortation ; it is a fool's philosophy. Many a time we should be most eloquent if we were most silent. There is an expressive silence. We might have been further on the road if we had not made so many circuitous excursions. As for the taunts of men, they are worth exactly what they are felt to be worth by the man who receives them. They break themselves in pieces when they are dashed against righteousness, but if they excite shame and inflict humiliation, then they are well-deserved.

Take another instance of a remarkable expression, which is found in the tenth verse :—"Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophecy deceits." Is there any deeper moral degradation ? Yet that this is perfectly possible is a fact which nearly every man can testify. What did the speakers want ? They wanted what is desired by every age, namely, to be entertained. It is entertainment that is often frittering away the noblest courage and finest faculty of the Church. We go to church to be entertained, not to be instructed. It would be with infinite difficulty that any instructive minister could make bread enough to live upon. That is the mournful report which I have to make concerning the age in which I live. There may be parts of the service which are instructive, and they are tolerated that the entertainment may be enjoyed :—entertain us with ritual, with music, with stories, with something that will give us intellectual excitement and even a degree of intellectual delight : but do not prophecy, do not teach, do not



become rigorously moral : let the day of judgment alone ; if we have to go to hell let us go down a bank covered with velvet moss. The people, as we have often had occasion to say, make the pulpit. When the pew insists upon being smoothed down, the pulpit will ultimately yield to the base temptation. It is an unquestionable fact that some ministries have been abandoned because the judgments of God have been proclaimed against sin. It is a fact that can hardly be explained that some parents will never allow their children to hear any other thing than that God is love. They are perfectly right if they will give a right definition to the term "love," which is one of the principal terms in the proposition. Is it right to tell a child or a man that love is all sentiment, all weakness, all pity, all tears ? It is love that burns ; it is love that judges ; it is love that damns. No other love would be worth having : it would be a mere trick of the heart ; it would indeed, when really analysed and penetrated to the core, be but exquisite religious selfishness. A religion that is not based on righteousness is a painted bubble, a floating, transient, empty cloud. Every man must examine himself with regard to the truthfulness of this charge, that men call upon the prophets to prophesy smooth things. We must take out of the discourse all hooks, all nails, all instruments that scourge and test the quality ; we must watch a white line of milk flowing through a meadow of emerald ; then we shall suppose that we have passed through a happy experience. The ministry should be like the Bible which it attempts to expound, now a Sinai, now a Golgotha ; now a storm that makes the horizon red, and now a chrism of dew that cools the earth, that loads the flowers with a burden of silver. The word of the Lord must be spoken in its entirety by the faithful teacher.

To show that what has been said upon the seventh verse is justified by the larger Scripture we have only to refer to verse fifteen—"In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength." There we have the truth which we thought we detected in the seventh verse. We have observed that when Satan quoted Scripture to Jesus Christ, the Saviour replied, "It is written of Satan—it is written again." We must have the two Scriptures. We could escape a great deal of trouble by omitting the "again,"

We must make the equipoise complete. There is an analogy, a proportion, a harmony, a combination of elements and thoughts, and we must bring all into one view before we can pronounce upon the purpose and doctrine of Scripture. Here is the solemn, noble word, "In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength:" not in sullenness, not in that pedantic and personal withdrawal which means—I will take no part and have no lot in your movement, and you must do as well without me as you can; I will stand within scanning distance, and watch your failure. Not that; such is the spirit of perdition: but quietness, the spirit which says, I would like to speak, but I may not, I will not, for God means me to be silent. "He that believeth shall not make haste,"—shall not be in a flurry, shall be guiltless of those spasms and paroxysms which attend the expression of furious and unregulated and unchastened energy. Let God's will be done: I stand, I wait; when the cloud leads, when the fire advances, when the voice comes, it will be enough for me to reply. That is the attitude of filial piety, that the sacred posture of men who have delivered up their lives into the hands of God. What can we do by our excitement, by our energy? In what does our activity end? In vanity, in nothingness, in a flutter which only disturbs the wind, but does not hasten the revolution of a star. The Lord reigneth. To be quiet is to be confident; to be confident is to be quiet; to love God is to leave everything with him: blessed are they who have reached that high estate of love and trust and homage.

A great promise is made in the twentieth verse:—

"And though the Lord gave you the bread of adversity, and the water of affliction, yet shall not thy teachers be removed into a corner any more, but thine eyes shall see thy teachers."

Both divine and human. We all need teachers. The wisest man in the world may be taught by a little child. The family is a school of revelation. No man knows human nature who does not know a little child and watch all its ways. Men only see human nature under dramatic conditions: it is calculated, dressed, decorated for the occasion, arranged; it has assumed the form of a programme: but a little child is, so to say, an extemporaneous revelation of human nature—man visibly

growing. This is to be insisted upon, because it might be thought that certain men by their very greatness need not to be taught. They themselves will tell you that their greatness has shown them the value of being instructed. The greater the man the simpler the teacher will he require; for simplicity sees further than intellectual vanity. Meekness is the genius that detains God in long and hallowed intercourse. "Thine eyes shall see thy teachers"—the men who spoke to us when we were sad, who came and stirred the fire for us when we were cold, who asked us to hospitality, and gave us both appetite and food; the men who had the key of heaven, the men who knew how to pray all our trouble away, as the sun knows how to take up the clouds and shadows that conceal the landscape. Our eyes shall see them, and seeing them we see as it were a revelation of God. They are the men who keep our thought up to high-water mark. We should shrink away in our very manhood but for the touch of these divinely-sent ambassadors. We know that if we miss them for one whole month we are less in manhood, we have gone down in the bulk and substance of all highest quality, we have lost the magic touch that feels life in the air. What shall we say to God for our teachers? so sweet, so kind, so good, seeing in us so many things they never named, because the name of them would hurt us without any lasting advantage, yet seeking to cleanse these very things out of us by coming down upon our life from great heights of thought and devotion, seeking to displace the evil by the introduction of the good.

Following upon this gift of teaching and teacher—

"Thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it" (ver. 21).

The voice we want to hear more distinctly. We should not care what way it is, provided we know it is God's way. Sometimes the voice has said, This is the way; down this hill, over these rocks, along that dark, swamplike valley, over that quaking bog, past yonder dim spectres. Lord, is this thy voice? and the answer has come—Yes, this is the way. What to? To morning, to completeness, to rest, to heaven! Sometimes the voice has said—This is the way: up these green slopes, over those sunny heights. Then we have never questioned the voice, but

we have said, "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform." How easy to believe that which we like! How wholly wanting in difficulty is obedience to an invitation to eat and drink abundantly of the wheatfields and the vineyards of all time! Oftentimes we should judge the divine voice by the measure of discipline which it involves and necessitates. Cut off thy right hand! Can that be God's voice? Yes. He delights in cutting off and wounding, because he says it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having all thy members and faculties to go down into darkness.

We find great promises in the chapter, wondrous assurances that we know nothing yet about light and glory and grace and heaven—

"Moreover the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day that the Lord bindeth up the breach of his people, and healeth the stroke of their wound" (ver. 26).

What use is made of "light" in the Bible in illustrating the way of God and Providence! We can only be taught by figure and symbol, by visible and palpable type. The idea of this verse is that as much light as is required for seven ordinary days shall be put into one Sabbath day. Think of it! One short day swallowing up seven days' light! Think of it! The sun shall be multiplied in splendour, and the moon shall be the sun of night, and all creation shall be bathed in light and decked with beauty, and there shall be no more death; the inhabitants shall not say to one another, I am sick. We need all these promises. There is cloud enough; there is sorrow enough; we need some gospel; and we know when the gospel is rationally true, adapted to our necessity, and complete in its provisions. Those who know most about the gospel revealed in the Bible are the first to say that they have never known anything like it in range and scope of application, in tenderness of appeal, in fine spiritual quality. It beareth all things; it carries away the sin of the world; it is mighty with the strength of omnipotence; it is tender with the tears of love. Those who have put their trust in the living God need no other trust. It fills the soul; it makes every day a Sabbath day, every morning a hint of resurrection, every noontide a type of the celestial city.

## Chapters xxxi.-xxxiii.

### PROPHETIC WARNINGS.

"Now the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit" (xxxi. 3).

**R**EMEMBER that. If on hearing that you choose to trust to Egypt, so be it; only, walk in the light, understand your position, make your choice deliberately, and abide by it. All that the Bible, a revelation from God, can do is to make distinctions, announce issues, address appeals to reason and to conscience, and there even an inspired volume ends its labour. The people imagined that Egypt was a sanctuary: the prophet said, It is so, in a very temporary and partial sense; it is a sanctuary of straw: if you care to seek protection in so frail a pavilion, so be it. You are delighted when you see the strong horses of Egypt; they are strong for horses, but they are only horses of flesh, they are not steeds of fire, horses of spirit,—those mighty flying horses stabled in the sanctuary of the skies, and sent forth with swift messengers to the ends of the universe. Understand what you are buying: it is a horse of flesh; it will sicken, and die; it may be crippled, or poisoned; it may throw you: but if after hearing these things you choose to elect the horses of Egypt in preference to the steeds of God, so be it; you must answer for it all. The fool cannot come in like the wise man at the last, and say, Pray excuse me: I was mistaken. No! you were not mistaken; you were perverse, headstrong, self-determined; there was no mere mistake about it. Understand the terms, and then proceed. The Bible is the finest book of reason. It appeals to the understanding, to the judgment, asking that judgment to reserve itself until the light is perfectly clear and all the evidence is before it, and then saying, Now decide.

The Lord reveals himself under a vivid figure as the protector

of those who put their trust in him. Egyptian horses cannot fly, but "as birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem" (xxxi. 5). The image is clear and impressive. There lies the fair city, more a thought than a thing, a poem in architecture God's poetry set forth in types and letters of stone, and the Lord himself is as a thousand birds, curling, circling, watching, protecting his loved Zion. No figure is to be driven to its furthest issues; we are to take out of it that which is substantial in reason and in truth: and from this figure we extract the doctrine that God hovers about his people, cares for them, watches them, sometimes sends a raven, it may be, to help them when they come out of their dream-sleep, wondering in daze and bewilderment what the universe was made for, and what they themselves can do. Any image that brings God nearer to us is an image that the memory should treasure. Hang up the picture in the halls of your imagination, and look upon it when your heart is sore and faint. The Lord knows what the issue of trusting in Egyptian horses will be, and what the end of all idolatry will be.

"For in that day every man shall cast away his idols of silver, and his idols of gold, which your own hands have made unto you for a sin" (xxxi. 7).

There is to be a day of awakening, a day memorable for its religious penetration; men are to see that they have been making idols where they thought they were making deities. When men become ashamed of their religion, and pray that its very name may not be mentioned to them; when they seek out of their secret places idols of silver and idols of gold, and say, Throw them anywhere—but let it be out of sight! then has come to pass the realisation of divinest prophecy. Who would have all his old ideas named to him? Though they be innocent, yet they be so imperfect, so poor, so shallow, so wanting in insight and sagacity, their own thinker would not hear of them any more, but would say with somewhat of penitence and shamefacedness, but with no sense of guilt, When I was a child, I thought as a child: I am a man now, and I have seized a wider philosophy: spare me the recollection of infantile thinking. But a man may become ashamed of his religion; he may have to say in plain



terms: I have been a fool herein, for I have been bowing the knee to gold and silver, and fame and influence and office and position, and now they cannot help me one whit: when I am ill they never call to see me, and if they did call their comfort would be cold and their touch would be death: where is the true God, the living Spirit—call it by what name you may—God—or Holy Ghost—or dying Christ—or truth, complete and eternal? Where is the true deity, that knows me and can come into my heart and make it warm with love, that can come into my barren spirit, and make it grow with trees that bloom and blossom and fructify for the soul's satisfaction? Preach to me the true gospel, that is as much a gospel in the darkness as in the light, in the winter as in the summer, the gospel that will sit up with me all night, see my last friend depart, and then say, Now they have all gone, let us talk it out in the music of absolute confidence. Do not be distressed about the living God. All the issue is mapped out. God himself is in no agitation; by right of eternity he is eternally calm. They who have the truth can wait until the lies all take fire, and burn themselves: meanwhile, all they have to do is to speak the truth, and deliver divine comfort to souls that want to be right; though they may have a thousand intellectual errors, still their supreme desire is to be right and good and true, and therein they shall conquer, though at the last their poor understanding be thickly sown with innumerable weeds. Herein is the mercy of God, that it recognises the supreme motive and purpose of life, and has an infinite charity for all intellectual aberration that is not inspired by moral obstinacy or moral selfishness.

Then the true king is predicted. We have had judgment upon judgment, great shocks of thunder; we have seen the horizon red as blood with the gathering storm, and we have heard God's voice breaking out into ten thousand tones severe and awful: it is time we had a little music, somewhat of benediction, a hint of tenderness; the sky is never so blue as after the storm, the tempest seems to have cleared all the atmosphere, and dear, sweet, beautiful heaven looks down upon us like a smile that wants to come all the way if it could, and cover our lips with love. Isaiah has been dispensing woes; he has not done with

maledictions yet: but who can always be comminatory, denunciatory? Who can be severe all the day? The prophet breaks down in tenderness, but rises in intellectual majesty when he says—

“Behold, a king shall reign in righteousness, and princes shall rule in judgment. And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. And the eyes of them that see shall not be dim, and the ears of them that hear shall hearken. The heart also of the rash shall understand knowledge, and the tongue of the stammerers shall be ready to speak plainly” (xxxii. 1-4.)

He is undoubtedly speaking of a mortal king. Let us keep step for step with the grammar and the history, and we have nothing to fear. Let us say this king is Hezekiah. That does not necessarily limit the truth to any one personality or individual reign. The possibility of a Hezekiah is only the hint of a larger possibility. When the child has found a snowdrop he has found the summer: that snowdrop could not have grown if the summer were not hovering about somewhere, just within reach or within sight, or within the assurance of a consciousness that knows that a single leaf means an infinite paradise. And one swallow really does mean, properly interpreted, a summer, notwithstanding the proverb to the contrary. That a Hezekiah was possible in history is proof presumptive that a Christ is still more possible; nay, that a Christ made Hezekiah; that there could have been no Hezekiah but for the Son of God; otherwise, then the Lord would have been making little types and symbols, and bringing forth all his small endeavours to a palpable and detestable abortion. Every great man in history has signified that a greater still is coming. So if we do adopt the theory that this is Hezekiah, we are not deprived of the glowing hope that another and greater is on his way. And now that the New Testament lies open before us we are prepared to say that Jesus Christ fills all these conditions: he reigns in righteousness, he rules in judgment, he is a hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; he is like rivers of water in a dry place, he is as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land; and the eyes of them that see him are not dimmed, and the ears of them that hear are entranced by his ineffable music. Again and again we have insisted in

protesting against that school of interpretation which would make havoc of the Bible by finding all its meanings exhausted in the letter. Prepared to acknowledge that the letter has its meaning, its load of thought which it discharges, and then itself passes on to inutility, we still insist that wherever there is a primrose there is a garden, wherever there is one little note of music there is a great orchestra presently to be revealed, and we shall hear singers who can sing and harpers who can harp, and all creation shall vibrate to the march and purpose of eternity.

The war is now over : Asher has been crushed like a serpent, and this sweet voice is heard when the enemy has been driven out of the land—

“Blessed are ye that sow beside all waters, that send forth thither the feet of the ox and the ass ” (xxxii. 20).

This is an afterward gospel. The meaning of the passage is this :—now the land is all free to be sown ; the warrior has been driven out of the country, and you can sow now beside all waters, beside rivers and lakes and streamlets, and you can have all the advantages of nature, so that what you sow will come up by-and-by in golden blessing : the Assyrian has gone ; he thought\* to have captured Jerusalem, and he was crushed before its walls : now that the war is over, away to agriculture, to cultivation, to making the grass grow, to making the wheat thrive : all the waters are at your disposal, all the ships of war have gone, and the waters now are for the irrigation of the land, and all you have to do is to seize the opportunity and to go forth bearing precious seed, and you shall come back again rejoicing, bringing your sheaves with you ; for the water has been kind, you have not thrown away your seed on barren sand, but you have cast it within conditions favourable to its development and fructification. Understand that times of peace are to be times of cultivation. We are not to be great only in war. We are not to live an excited life, always following the banner and the trumpet and the sword, and obeying the call to arms ; no sooner is the enemy to be gone, than we are to be up and doing. What was the enemy—ignorance ? It is gone : now seize the tide that is in the affairs of men. Affliction, so that now the body was in

good sound health? This is the time for learning, for study, for sowing seed, that in old age there may be ample reaping, yea, and some gleanings for those who come after. The earth waits to be tilled. The hours are opportunities; the days are chances that lie heavenward. Blessed are they who have the opportunity of sowing beside all waters, and who have such abundant crops that the ox may go where it likes, and the ass may rove at pleasure: take down your boundaries and hedges; the land is an infinite wheatfield; let the ox have what he wants, let the ass take what he needs; they shall roam and rove without being cared for as to the devastation that is created, for when they have taken all they can consume the cry shall be, There is bread enough and to spare! The genius of God is the genius of plentifulness.

What wondrous music, then, we have heard in all these prophecies! Yet, as we have just pointed out, the maledictions have not altogether ceased. The prophet resumes his threnody in the thirty-third chapter; there he mourns, and in the course of his deliverance he uses one of those ironical expressions which come upon us again and again in Holy Writ. In the fourteenth verse he talks about "the sinners in Zion." What a contradiction in terms! what a shock to the fancy! Zion! fair Zion, a dewdrop, a glittering star, a garden of beauty, a sweet flower, porcelain without a flaw, honey without wax—Zion! Then, "sinners in Zion"—sinners out of place; they spoil the situation; they are an evil blot in the fair landscape. Sinners in the wilderness, sinners in polluted cities, sinners in hell,—there you have a kind of music that has an accord and consonance of its own; but sinners in Zion! And the sinners in Zion are afraid—"fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites." Yesterday their faces were bright, and their voices glad, and their feasts were merry; but in the night-time something has happened that has struck the whole horde with fear and shame and distress. Now the question comes—"Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?" How often have preachers preached everlasting hell from these words! They have no relation whatever to the future life. We must keep to the meaning of the speakers

and writers in Holy Writ, and not import into their words significations and dogmas of our own. The question is an awful one—"Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire?"—when God comes to judge the city, when he comes to judge Assyria or Jerusalem, or any land. "Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?"—when God tries man by fire. The fire shall not only try every man's work, but shall try every man's self. Our quality must be tested by flame. From these words how easy to dilate upon the horrors of the lost, the agonies of the damned! But the words were local, and they constitute a question to which a noble reply was made. The question is in the fourteenth verse, the answer is in the fifteenth. Read the question—

"Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly; he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil; he shall dwell on high: his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks: bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure" (xxxiii. 14-16).

That flame shall burn yonder, but the righteous man shall be upon a castle of rock. That is the answer to the piercing inquiry. It is true in all ages. Character is always safe when it is good. Let come what may, there is one man who should suffer no loss, and that is the man who loves God, and lives in God, and does the right—in detail, "he that walketh righteously and speaketh uprightly,"—the man who is all good, in purpose if not in absolute action; the candid man, the frank-hearted man; the soul that says, I will have a just weight and a right balance, come what may. "He that despiseth the gain of oppressions"—will not be rich at the expense of the misery of others,—“That shaketh his hands from holding of bribes,” saying, Bribes are lies,—“that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood,” for the spirit of cruelty is not in him,—“and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil”—a wonderful expression in the original: so shutting his eyes as not even to wink, that is, not to open the lids for one transient moment that he may see where evil is, or know what evil is like, or what evil is doing, but shuts his eyes fast, and will not look at the devil's image: he shall be calm in the storm:

the smell of fire shall not pass upon him ; when all Tophet is ablaze, and all evil things are crackling and burning, and falling into smoke, and crumbling into white ashes, he shall be in the mountain castle, safe, calm, at rest with God. Here again let us be just to our own doctrine. These are the historical lines of the case, but there may be meanings infinitely beyond. Let us not deplete Holy Writ of any lesson that can excite healthy fear, that can bring the soul which has sinned into abjectness and terror, and that can startle the impenitent into the cry, "What must I do to be saved?" There are to be burnings : there is to be an award made to the evil man. Never is one good word spoken about that man in all Scripture. The only thing that is said to him is this—Repent, and live : fail to repent, and accept the consequences of obstinacy. Then there is also a castle not made with hands, and not planted on the mountains, but a city that hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God ; and all souls born again, brought into sympathy with the mystery of the priesthood of Christ, cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, forgiven at the Cross, and because of the Cross, and because of the Cross alone,—these shall go away into life eternal. Say unto the righteous, It shall be well with him : say unto the wicked, It shall be ill with him. Son of man, hear the word of the Lord, and declare it. "If the watchman see the sword come, and blew not the trumpet, and the people be not warned ; if the sword come, and take any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity ; but his blood will I require at the watchman's hands." Lord, this is right !



## Chapters xxxiv., xxxv.

### CONTRASTS IN PROVIDENCE.

THESE chapters are part of the summing-up of the first section of Isaiah's double volume. They are the epilogue of the first volume. Hezekiah was closing his sovereignty, apparently; whether anything may occur to extend the reign will presently be seen. The Egyptian alliance, and the attack of Sennacherib upon Israel, are matters that have fallen back a long way, if not in time-distance, yet in sense of victory and deliverance. These are two wonderful chapters, and great use is made of them by Jeremiah and by Zephaniah. This use of the Bible by the Bible is of great consequence; not only is it interesting as a literary incident, but it is full of suggestion as to the range and certainty and usefulness of inspiration. The thirty-fourth chapter stands in wondrous contrast to the thirty-fifth. We shall have to pass through night to enter into day; we shall have to listen to such a storm as never burst on land and sea, before we come into the garden of delight, the paradise of Christ, the restored and immortal Eden. The styles of the two chapters are such as hardly any one man could command. It would seem as if each chapter required a whole genius to itself. It will be wonderful if the same hand should be cunning enough to write the storm, and write the hymn: to create the wilderness, and create the land of blossoming and joy.

In the first instance "the indignation of the Lord is upon all nations" (xxxiv. 2). A singular word is that—"indignation"—in this connection. It has in it the sense of boiling. It is not a passing wrath; a cloud without substance that frowns, and vanishes. Here the judgment of the Lord boils like a cauldron, and nations are thrown into it as trifles. All things, great and small, that have set themselves against the Lord of heaven, are

thrown into the cauldron that they may perish in the fury of the Lord's indignation. Nor is this the work of man. Statesmanship, diplomacy, and all craft, bearing upon war and delighting in it, must stand back, whilst the Lord himself claims the entire responsibility of the marvellous action. He will speak for himself; he shall speak of his own sword, and he shall say "My sword shall be bathed in heaven:" not the sword of some king or captain of war, but "My sword"—long, heavy, keen, tempered in heaven; a sword that no man can handle, no human fingers grasp. We read of the Greeks dipping their swords in order to give the steel due temper. Here is a sword that is dipped: but it is dipped in heaven; the secret of the tank in which it is plunged is on high. The moral is obvious—namely, that the sword is not one of vengeance or bloodthirstiness, not a sword that longs for carnage merely for the sake of declaring victory and triumphing over the foe, but the sword is "bathed in heaven"—in righteousness, in truth, in equity; it is not only a symbol of war, it is a symbol of moral judgment. When God's own sword, heaven-bathed, strikes a man or a nation, it is righteousness that affirms itself, it is goodness that declares the range of its sovereignty.

As for the whole structure of things, down it must come in the day of judgment.

"And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig tree" (xxxiv. 4).

We look upon "all the host of heaven" as the very symbols of security. When we would signify some idea of eternity, we think of the sun that burns from age to age, without loss of light; but when the greatest agitation takes place, the great moral assertion of God, all things are dwarfed and put into their proper relation to himself, and wherever there is a sign of weakness which amounts almost to contemptibleness, that is claimed as the best symbol of the action of God when he ariseth to declare his judgment: suns are withered leaves, the constellations are as grass cast into the oven; the whole framework of the universe is seen then in its littleness and worthlessness. There is nothing eternal but right; nothing grand but truth; nothing worth pre-

serving but pureness and love. In vain we seek to hide ourselves behind the sun ; God's judgment will strike through that wall of fire and find us as if we had stood before it face to face in open defiance : in vain we think to plunge ourselves into the forests of the constellations, and lose ourselves in the mysteries of the intricacies of the heavens ; when God looks all things fall away from his gaze, and the sun is left to return to an angry yet loving God. Isaiah is now supposed to be in his elder age. He writes with the vigour of youth. The dash, the energy, the rush of blood in this poem, what are they but indications of strength that cannot be quelled, energy that cannot be tamed by aught less than the almightiness of God ?

"The sword of the Lord is filled with blood, it is made fat with fatness" (xxxiv. 6).

The Lord returns not from war other than as conqueror. His is not a blood-sprinkled sword, but a sword drunk with blood. To-day, that is within the range of this chapter, God "hath a sacrifice in Bozrah [the Metropolis of Edom], and a great slaughter in the land of Idumea," not hid under its Greek designation,—but still the ancient hostile Edom—that stumbling-block in the way of heaven, that early curse in history, that marvel amounting to a mystery in the whole tragedy of human life. The figure glows with energy. The Lord is in Edom ; he is in the very London of Edom, yea, in the very Bozrah, and at night his sword will be drunk with blood. Call these, if you please, emblematic representations of a great truth, still the great truth itself remains, and that great truth is, that the Lord has a day of judgment, a day of vengeance, a day of retribution. That is the permanent lesson. Dismiss all Hebrew redundancy of terms, all Oriental imagery, and you still have left this fact, that there are times in human history when God stands forth with sword in hand as a man of war. That can never be rationally denied, or can never encounter any denial that is sustained by confirmation. Nations have been smitten, thrones have been torn, kings that have no right to reign, or have forfeited their original right, have been dethroned and blown away into undiscoverable wildernesses, yea, have been lost in time's oblivion ; and meaner men, men of our own stature and range of influence, who have been unfaithful to the genius

of stewardship, have been put down, burned, crushed, destroyed, removed, so that the very place where once they stood can no longer be identified: God hath swept their footprints out of a universe which they defiled by their presence. To realise this is to be chastened; is to be quickened into a sense of responsibility; is to be elevated by that sacred wonder which easily learns how to pray.

The prophet having said all this may have been afraid that he would be considered as a madman. What he declared might have been regarded as a poetic paroxysm, an intellectual violence in which the prophet did in metaphor and symbol what he would have done, could his passions have claimed all their desire, in bold and literal realisation. So in another tone he says,

“Seek ye out of the book of the Lord, and read” (xxxiv. 16).

This is not the ebullition of a moment; this is the writing of God from time's first day; nay, earlier than that, for all that arose on the little theatre of time began in the infinite ranges of eternity: the sin was all foreseen, the sinner was fore-redeemed, the Lamb was slain from before the foundation of the world. Isaiah, therefore, would not have it that what he was speaking was the rhetoric of a moment, a sudden passion that had no relation to history or prophecy; he would insist upon it that every word, though tipped with fire, was a Bible word, a word long written, that had about it the mystery and solemnity of eternity. The judgments of the Lord are not accidents. He is not suddenly awakened so as to pursue a new moral policy in his universe. “Seek ye out of the book of the Lord, and read:” from the beginning sin was hated, sin was punished, hell was provided for retribution. Whatever transpires within the theatre of the universe can bring no surprise to the infinite mind, for by the necessity of its infiniteness all was foreseen. The prophet thus comes away from the whirlwind of his excitement to stand upon the rock of revelation, and there he abides, and declares that the ruin that is to be wrought is not a ruin that is without spirit or reason or judgment. “He hath cast the lot for them, and his hand hath divided it unto them by line” (xxxiv. 17). Ruin is measured out. Chaos has a geometric form to the eye

that created it. There is nothing of mere tumult, or uproar, or indiscriminateness, in the scattering of divine criticism and judgment and penalty : even our ruin is meted out, our destruction is a calculation, our hell is a measured territory.

Who can live in that thirty-fourth chapter? Who can abide in the city once so fair, but now handed over to the cormorant and the bittern? a city and land in which men shall call for the nobles, but none shall be there; thorns growing in palaces, nettles and brambles in the fortresses where soldiers lived; dragons inhabiting the old places that were sacred, and owls holding court where wise men used to think and rule: "There shall the great owl make her nest, and lay, and hatch, and gather under her shadow; there shall the vultures also be gathered, every one with her mate:" it shall not be a solitary vulture alighting upon a shattered rock and flying off again, but "vultures"—one, two; vulture and mate shall abide there, and build their house there, and make their home there, and the whole place shall be filled with their black images. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Or strip the imagery, and there remains after the last symbol has gone the terrific yet beneficent fact that the Lord reigneth and God is judge of all.

Could the man who wrote that chapter of light and darkness, storm and ruin, write in any other style? He proceeds to contrast himself with himself, for no sooner is the ruin measured out than he begins:

"The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon, they shall see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God" (xxxv. 1, 2).

That is not the same Isaiah! Yes, that is the same poet, prophet, statesman, revolutionist. It is the same sky you saw last night: when you last saw it, it was black with storms, the wind was in torment, and all heaven in an agony of judgment; but now the whole arch is blue, and what clouds there are are like white wings, and the sun is as a strong man rejoicing to

run a race. What a history the sky has ! Does the sky write a book which we call a diary ?—how its pages must differ one from the other ! There can be no doubt of the primary reference of these prophecies. Again and again we have insisted that primary references shall be declared and claimed, but we have as frequently and persistently insisted that all larger meanings shall at least be assumed to be possible ; and when against those larger meanings we can bring positive history we are entitled to compare the one with the other and to say, the key fits the lock : we have found him who realises the prophecies in all their sublimity. So, without denying the right of ancient kings to some form of these beauteous words of real poetry, we see no reason why the meaning should not overflow the local and transitory event, and find its realisation ages away from the locality of origin.

The first promise is that of summer beauty : “ The rose—the glory of Lebanon—the excellency of Carmel and Sharon.” Why, these are summer words ! How the wind has changed ! It blows no longer from the cruel north-east, it comes up from the south and the south-west, and comes like a blessing ; every breath is a gospel, every breeze a new assurance of divine clemency and divine approach. Is there anything corresponding to this in Christian experience ? When a man passes out of the black night of sin, and the agonies of penitence, contrition, heart-break for evil done—is there any summer feeling in the soul when all is over, any celestial warmth, any outgoing of affection and triumph, and faith, and confidence, and praise ? Is there any stirring that might be as the flutter of budding wings ? Let those testify who know. Did Christ ever come into the heart without bringing summer with him, without making the heart conscious of a vitalising energy, so that the heart felt itself growing, felt itself to be not unfitly imaged by a garden in spring-time ? Has Christ ever come into the heart without abolishing death ? That black figure has always had to vanish when he came near. Death might call himself winter, but he had to go ; death might assume various poetical disguises, but he had to withdraw himself, for he is ghastly even in poetry. Who has received Christ into the heart, and has not been instantly conscious of



immortality? who has not stood above the affairs of time and space and all sense, and crushed the enemy under his feet, and has called for help to come from every quarter to swell his song of praise? Those who have not been in the masonry of this experience have called it ecstasy. There is no reason why they should call it by any other name, because they cannot rise above the level of their folly. It is for those who have lived long years with Christ, and have felt that the love becomes more glowing with the passing decades, to say whether it is mere rapture, or whether it is a sacred and rational joy.

Then there comes a sense of restored and augmented faculty :

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing” (xxxv. 5).

Surely we have read these very words in the history of Jesus Christ our blessed One, our Lord wounded and dead and rising again. This is precisely what happened wherever Messiah went. The blind opened their eyes to see first their God; the ears of the deaf were unstopped, and the first music they heard was the music of eternity; the lame man sprang up from the dust, and walked and leapt and praised God, and was a fool to those who had never known the joy of such emancipation. Does Christianity ever come into the heart without removing blindness, and deafness, and lameness; without unstopping the ears so that they may hear all the music of God's Gospel in Christ Jesus? It is the very glory of Christianity that it makes new creatures. Christianity is the second creator. Jesus Christ made man in God's image and likeness. It was an infinite task, and could only be undertaken by an infinite worker, but it was undertaken and accomplished; and to-day there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus, and they know nothing about blindness, deafness, lameness, dumbness; they say, All these old things have passed away, and all things have become new, and we are more than conquerors through him that loved us: Death, where is thy sting? Grave, where is thy victory? Avaunt, ye spoiled and uncrowned principalities and powers! Is this a rhapsody of Homer, or is it the hymn of actual experience? They, and they

only, can answer who have been in communion with the Son of God.

The next promise is that of substantial blessing :

“And the parched ground shall become a pool” (xxxv. 7).

We must understand these words as they would be understood in the East. The parched ground is rich in what is known as *mirage*—the image of water, a sheen that cheats the eye, and so successfully cheats it that the thirsty traveller says, I see rivers ! It is the mirage—(from *mirari*, to wonder at)—a beautiful thing : water on every hand : presently we shall drink and be glad. The traveller moves, the mirage recedes ; the traveller would seize the blessing, but the blessing was only in clouds : an optical delusion ; the eye has deceived the appetite. In the reign of Jesus Christ the parched ground shall become a pool of real water ; and the thirsty land springs, fountains : the period of mirage has vanished, the period of reality has set in. There have been many who have cheated us with promises of water, but the water has never been given to our burned lips : many have invented new philosophies, new religions, new opportunities of doing things, new chances of progress, and they have made the boldest offers to men, and the foolish men who have gone out to seize the blessings have returned hungrier and thirstier than ever. “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters” —not to the mirage, but to the actual palpable waters, meant for the quenching of thirst, intended for the fertilisation of the land. “If any man thirst”—blessed Saviour, all men thirst : thou didst in that *if* speak to all the world’s children,—“If any man thirst”—Lord, it is our soul that thirsts,—If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink.” “If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink ; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.” Lord, give us this spring water ! so pure, so cooling. Send none unblessed away !

Then the prophet sees a great highway ; and the way is called—

“The way of holiness ; the unclean shall not pass over it ; but it shall be  
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for those: the wayfaring men, though fools [the very simplest minds], shall not err therein. No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there" (xxxv. 8, 9).

It is a well-kept way, broad, plentifully supplied with sunshine, margined with all fairest flowers and most fruitful trees; and the whole avenue, stretching heavenward, shall be filled with the ransomed of the Lord, bought, but not with money, redeemed, but not with price, and they shall come to Zion with songs. The song must always have a place in human history. The fool tries to sing his sorrow away, but there is no reason in the music, so the song is a failure. But this music is to be the last expression of a long process of discipline and chastening and purification. Isaiah is said to be in his old age; yet he opens his old eyes and sees panorama after panorama of progress and glory and light, and see how the old man turns his ear, for he says, What music is this? what sound of music and dancing do I hear? He is no sullen, sour-hearted elder brother when they tell him that the world was lost and is found, dead and is alive again; he says, I will enter and join the glad festival: this is the world's jubilee! We want old men of that temper; not pessimists, not persons who discourage us, not aged ones who sigh away the enthusiasm of youth, but brave, grand old soldiers who say, Well, we have had our day, we cannot go out ourselves, for we should only now go to failure because of physical infirmity; but boys, youths, maidens, not one of you must stop at home: go away: fight the Lord's battles; and when you come back you will bring a song with you, for the Lord is with you, and the Omnipotent is the surety of your success.

## CHAPTERS xxxvi.-xxxix.

### THE BLASPHEMY OF RABSHAKEH.

THE prophecies of Isaiah constitute a threefold division : first, chapters i.-xxxv. ; second, chapters xxxvi.-xxxix. ; third, chapters xl.-lxvi. We have just considered the noble words which formed the peroration of Isaiah's political eloquence. The four chapters (xxxvi.-xxxix.), were possibly not written by Isaiah himself ; they may, it is thought, have been appended by some disciple or editor in the time of Ezra. In proper chronology chapters xxxviii., xxxix. should come first.\* For our purpose it will be enough to pause here and there at some point of direct spiritual utility. For example, here is a man, a chief officer or cupbearer, Rabshakeh by name, who represents the king of Assyria, and embodies the brutality and blasphemy which have ever distinguished the enemies of truth and righteousness. Rabshakeh began his communications with Hezekiah by a taunt. He reminded the king that he had trusted in the staff of a broken reed, that is, upon Egypt ; "whereon if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it : so is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all that trust in him" (ver. 6). Rabshakeh had the advantage of

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\* "It is probable that Isaiah published his prophecies in separate collections or volumes. They are not arranged in chronological order. It is not until we come to the sixth chapter that we read the account of his appointment to his prophetic office. It has been supposed that some at least of the preceding chapters belong to the reign of Jotham. . . . The prophecies against foreign nations are grouped together by the common 'burden' with which they begin, just as the later series of prophecies (xxviii.-xxxiii.), are connected by the denunciation of 'woe' by which they are prefaced. It is possible that the historical chapters (xxxvi.-xxxix.), are an extract from 'the vision,' which, as we learn from the Books of Chronicles, embodied the history of Hezekiah ; though here again, there is no chronological arrangement, the account of Sennacherib's invasion, which took place ten years after the embassy of Merodach-Baladan, being narrated first."—Professor SAYCE, LL.D.

truth on this occasion, and he wished to push it to undue uses or extract from it fallacious inferences, on the supposition that Hezekiah being able to confirm his testimony upon one point would be predisposed to accept it on another. Rabshakeh offered to lay a wager when he said, "Now therefore give pledges" (ver. 8). The proposition is marked by extreme ludicrousness, being nothing less than to find two thousand horses for the use of Hezekiah if the king on his part should be able to set riders upon them. This was the taunt of defiance; this has about it all the brutality of men who know that their proud offers cannot be accepted. Where there is great weakness on the one side, it is easy to boast of great pomp and power on the other.

Rabshakeh continued his empty boast either personally or representatively, when he said, "I now come up without the Lord against this land to destroy it" (ver. 10). Here we have an instance of a perverted truth. Isaiah had distinctly taught that it was Jehovah himself who had brought the king of Assyria into Judah, and they who were opposed to the people of God were prepared to say that such being the case it was evident that the king of Assyria was really the representative of the God of heaven, and now Rabshakeh or the king of Assyria may be said to assume the character of a defender of the faith.

Rabshakeh made a bold appeal to the people when he said, "Hearken not to Hezekiah: for thus saith the king of Assyria, Make an agreement with me by a present, and come out to me: and eat ye every one of his vine, and every one of his fig tree, and drink ye every one the waters of his own cistern; until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of corn and wine, a land of bread and vineyards" (vers. 16, 17). How eloquent was Rabshakeh in the telling of lies! Hezekiah's people had only to leave the besieged city, and to go into the Assyrian camp, and they would be allowed the greatest privileges; thus Rabshakeh adds the torment of sarcasm to the sufferings of war, and actually proposes to the people to accept the doom of exile as if it were a change for the better! It is supposed that the taunt and the promise may perhaps be connected with Sennacherib's boast that he had made the water supply of the cities of his empire.

## Chapter xxxvi. 19.

‘ Where are the gods of Hamath and Arphad ? where are the gods of Sepharvaim ? ’ (xxxvi. 19).

### ENQUIRY FOR GODS.

THESE enquiries may by a slight accommodation be used as showing some characteristics of false gods, and showing, by implication, the glory and worship which are due to the one living Lord. Men have a distinct right to enquire for their gods. Almighty God himself does not shrink from this test of personality and nearness. He will be enquired of. He has proclaimed himself accessible. “Come, now, let us reason together ;” “Call upon me in the day of trouble ;” “Seek ye the Lord while he may be found ;” “Draw nigh unto him and he will draw nigh unto you ;” “Prove me now herewith, saith the Lord.” All these passages show that God is within reach of the heart of man ; and that religion, as well as bringing with it a divine fear, brings with it also a divine companionship. Men cannot live on mere sublimity. Tell a man that there is a Being seated above the stars mighty and glorious—yea, who is terrible in strength and dazzling in splendour—and you have told him nothing worth hearing. Your statement is void by generality. God is all that. But to be all that so that it may have any good effect upon man, he must be less than that. Upon the sphere of his infinitude there must be points of love. Man cannot get hold of infinitude. He must have something that he can lay the hands of his heart upon. God must give miniatures of himself, which little children even can put away in the hiding-places of their love as their chief jewels. Whilst a god may be too great, he may also be too small. He may be too great to be available for common daily use and defence. If you want to pass through a toll-bar, and have nothing but a thousand pound note for the payment, you are, so far as that toll-bar is concerned, as badly off as a beggar



who has not a penny. A man may die of thirst even amid the billows of the Atlantic. If our god be therefore merely a distant sublimity, a bewildering dream, a creation of poetry, he is no god to us; and one day we shall be taunted by the mocking question, "Where is thy god, O worshipper of the golden mists?" What is a man's god? A man's god is whatever is the supreme object of his admiration and trust. It may be beauty, it may be strength, it may be money, it may be fame, it may be self-righteousness, it may be self-confidence. Now the one principle which it is proposed to illuminate and apply is, that there are times in life when a man instinctively or by force enquires for his god; and that he who cannot, in such critical hours, find his god, has made the profoundest and saddest spiritual mistake in the bestowment of his affections and the gift of his trust.

There are times when you are dissatisfied with yourself; when you feel your utter nothingness; exhaustion, not to say insufficiency, but entire vanity and self-vexation. Take a season of utter prostration, of physical pain, of bodily decay, when the strong man is withered, when the strength we used to boast of is strong no longer, and we are afraid of that which is high. At such a time we look out for something greater than ourselves. We put to ourselves these enquiries:—Do all things waste away as our strength has done? Is our weakness the measure of all other power? Is there no one who can meet us in this extremity of feebleness,—who can come down to us, not in the thunder of his great power, but in the condescension of his almightiness? Is there no one who has learned how to come near a weak man without shattering him by the breath of his power? The weak man does not want mere power to come to him. He wants graduated power,—power that is in the hands of mercy, power that can adapt itself to the weakness and infirmity of human conditions. It is when we can only speak in sighs, and reason in whispers, that our heart goes out in a piercing, urgent enquiry, Where is the god on whom I once did rest the whole pressure of my life, in whom I did place all the trust of my love?

Look at a time of commercial panic, business distress, when no man knows whom to trust; when a smile upon the counte-

nance may be but the signal of intended treachery; when the greatest houses are crumbling at their foundation; when things which were of value yesterday are of no value at this moment; when men's hearts are quaking because of the fear that they dare not touch their own fortune lest it should prove itself to be gilded nothingness,—when they are afraid that the very glance of an eye will pierce their possessions as lightning might and utterly wither them away. Man cannot be satisfied then without the supernatural; he may even drift into superstition. But into the invisible he will go, if so be he be not an utter beast, and have not lost his power of reasoning and his power of hope in the mammon worship of a misdirected life. Atheists pray when they are in extreme pain or peril. Atheists! men who would say, when the sun was clear and all was well with them, that there was no God. We have known such when in agony to cry out for God to have mercy upon them. Oh, wretched theologians!

There are times when all men either come quietly, with reverence and tenderness, to seek God who has withdrawn for a moment, or when they are startled, frightened into momentary devotion. Anyhow, the great principle is affirmed in daily experience, that men do enquire for their gods when the times are heavy against them and there is some special sore cankering and consuming their hearts. Man likes to make gods; he is fond of god-making. What sort of gods does he make? You may tell me, when some are named, that it is but a common-place in human history. Alas! when we have pronounced some things to be common-place, we consider we have explained them and defended them. A thing is not right because it is common-place. Familiarity is no vindication of vice. Because we have been long accustomed to a theory or practice, the theory or practice is not therefore unimpeachable, right and true as before God. Some men—without perhaps intending it, and who would shrink from this bald way of stating what they have done—have made money their God. The time will come when such common-places will startle men; when the mud they have trodden under their feet, and by treading it have buried great principles and holy purposes, will startle them, rise up before them, and make them

tremble and quake. Some people have made money their god, and there is not a more helpless god in all the temples of idolatry. Cry aloud, for he is a god! he is talking or walking, hunting or sleeping, pursuing or driving, or anything you please. He will never come to you in the crisis of your life. He will make little compromises with you, help you over divers stiles, solve certain little problems for you. But when your soul is in agony, when your life has wrought itself down to the one last spasm, he will be a dumb god. Having hands, he will not help; having eyes, he will not see; having ears, he will not hear. Who was it? It was certainly not a beggar in the streets,—it was some royal great one who cried, “Millions of money for an inch of time!” There was an offer! Why, it might have altered the pulse of the money market if the thing had been feasible—it might have changed the vein of financial affairs for the time being. An inch of time—millions of money! And the bargain could not be struck. We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. If you could take a five pound note with you across the grave into yonder invisible mysterious world, nobody would know what it was. You would have to explain it, and nobody would believe you. You might hold it up, and show the water-mark, and lecture upon it, and turn it round and round, and nobody could change it. Yet there are some men who practically, not theoretically, have made this money their god, and have said they will run unto this money as into a strong tower in the time of storm and flood and tempest and great trial.

There is another god that some men are making. Perhaps, a great many young men may be engaged in this manufacture. Its name is *Luck*! It is a little English word. Luck! Some men have faith in their luck. They say, “Things will not turn out so badly after all. I have always been able to get upon the sunny side of the road, and something will occur to get me upon that side again. I have trusted the chapter of accidents. My chances have always turned out right, and they will turn out right again.” There never was so mocking an idol as luck. Have you seen a great picture of a scene in a gambling place, where everything seems to depend upon the shuffling of certain

pieces of ivory or brass, on the doing of certain things in a skilful, quick way, when a wrong turn may mean utter waste of fortune and dispossession of estate and inheritance? Have you seen what expression there is upon the countenances of the parties engaged,—what anxiety, what hope, in some cases what shadowing despair just begun, hope just going away? Yonder can be seen a little fringe of light, and despair just coming on. It is the god luck that is tormenting his soul. But the young man who throws in a game of that kind and is lucky, will have another game to play. He has another competitor who will force him, and say, "Now you must have the dice out again." The name of that last competitor is Death, and he will play you. The young man says, "I do not want to play." Death grasps him by the throat, and says, "You shall play!" Now he gets hold of his dice-box, and Death always wins. You see how strong we are when we teach according to the revelation of God and the facts of nature. There is a point where you cannot escape us. There are thousands of miles where we can have something like an equal fight, and you can throw us in the tussle, but when we come up to this last point of all you cannot get away! Death is only a spectre, but you cannot toss him; a shadow, but you cannot evade him; a grim thing, that you say that you could smash. Try it! What will you do when you come to that last game of all, to close this strange eventful history? Where is your god then? Where is all the old fortune of chance and happy luck and sunny accident? Once you had only to touch a thing and it became gold. Other men threw bargains down because they could make nothing of them, and you went and picked them up and instantly they blossomed and flowered into beauty and success. Ha! where is your luck now? Granted that some men may have drilled themselves into the power of laughing their way out of the world. Let us suppose—although by doing so we insult all divine power and truth—but let us suppose that, last of all, a man could snap his finger at God and eternity and heaven and hell, and go out of the world as a merry dancer might whirl out of a lamp-lit room. What of it? Who dare risk it? No wise man who knows life, and is sensible on ordinary affairs, dare make up his mind to be at last a fool like that.

Some men's god is a well-favoured countenance. They trust to their shape, figure, bearing, expression. They say, "My face is an introduction, a certificate, a guarantee: wherever I go a space is cleared for me." There are men who trust to outward figure and expression of countenance; who believe that one look of the eyes means conquest. And many a man who does not make a good show in the flesh, but who has an honest and true heart, who is gold all through and through his soul, is sneered at by this man of a well-favoured person, of ruddy countenance, of face that is a key to confidence and a passport to admiration! A very superficial god, by the way! I can imagine such persons brought into circumstances which will try their god severely.

Yonder is a man lofty in stature, portly in bearing, commanding in all the attributes of external person. He says that he feels a pain piercing him: he laughs, and says, Presently it will be gone! But that great chest of his has a second stab inflicted upon it, and back it goes, and his shoulders come up. His friends who were once proud of him hardly know him; and he says, in a voice no longer with the old ringing tone, "Take me home." He is taken home, and betakes himself to his bed. His physician comes to his room and says, "This is a case of small-pox." "No!" "It is." Aye, and that god of his will be dug in the face till the man's own mother will not know him, and the sister who loved him best will pray to escape from his presence. It may be so. God can blotch your skin! God can send poison into your blood! And you, who sneered at ungainly virtue, at unfavoured honesty, may be a corrupt worm-eaten pestilent thing in the dirt! What, then, if any man should say to you, Where is thy God? What if it should be said to you, as was said to an ancient people, "Thy calf, O Samaria, hath cast thee off." Samaria trusted to her calf that it would stand her in good stead at all times and in all places. But there came upon her a point of history when the calf turned away and there arose a mocking shout, "Thy calf, O Samaria, hath cast thee off." Samaria being calfless was godless. There are times in life when men have to look about for their gods. There are some gods that lure their worshippers on and on until, having got to the brink of the precipice, they vanish and no prayer can recover their presence



Now we have to face the mystery of the revelation of the true God in times of human need. This part of the subject is not free from difficulty. Many a man has felt the most intense pain on observing what he supposed was God's absence from the scene of human affairs. God has been looked for and looked for apparently in vain. When his voice might have hushed the storm not a sound was heard. When his coming would have been more welcome than morning light or summer beauty, he did not appear to eyes that wearily waited for him. There has gone up a cry from hearts sad with intolerable grief, "Why standest thou afar off, O Lord?" This difficulty must be grappled with if we would be honest to all sides of our great subject. In reply to this difficulty I suggest three things.

As a mere matter of fact, attested by a thousand histories known in our own experience, God has appeared in vindication of his name and honour. The whole Bible shows this to be a truth. There is no need to quote history upon history to prove it. These things are known to your own recollection. Once upon a time a grand old Methodist preacher, called John Nelson—a man whose life ought to be read often on Saturday night by preachers who have got their skeletons ready, in order that they might be fired to do their work—was obliged to become a soldier, and as he was arrayed, and was being mocked by many, a woman came to him and said, "Nelson, where is now thy God? Thou didst say at Shent's door that thou hadst no more fear of all his promises failing than thou hadst of falling through the centre of the earth. Where is now thy God?" You know how mocking a bad woman can be, what sharpness there is in her voice. Nelson, in whom the word of God dwelt richly, said "You will find the answer in the seventh chapter of Micah, the eighth and tenth verses." "Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy; when I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me. Then she that is mine enemy shall see it, and shame shall cover her which said unto me, Where is the Lord thy God? mine eyes shall behold her: now shall she be trodden down as the mire of the streets." Everything is in the Bible! There is an answer to everything in God's Book, only sometimes we do not know our lesson well enough to refer to the place.



These old Methodist preachers, who had nothing but the Bible, and perhaps a borrowed Concordance, were mighty in God's word, and oftentimes their sword, the sword of the Holy Ghost, cleft the opposition by which they were annoyed. I have some reason to believe that the answer given by John Nelson was literally fulfilled in the experience of the woman who taunted him with the question which is now quoted. Whether or not, there are instances from the beginning of history down to our own times which show that God has interposed in human affairs to regulate, control, dispose, and in all things to glorify his own name.

As a first principle in sound theology, it must be admitted that God himself is the only true judge as to the best manner and time of interposition. By so much as he is God this point at least must be conceded. Let us be fair to the Almighty, as we would be fair to man. By so much as he is God—infinite, almighty, all-wise—he must know better than we when to come and how to come. Stephen was taken by the mob, dragged out and stoned. "Where was his God then?" was once the mocking enquiry of a well-known free-thinker. A man must not go away and think about a question of that kind for a month, and then come with a reply: he must answer there and then. Promptness is success; immediateness in such a case as that is conquest. The case was apparently dead against the Christian theory. Here is a man, full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, overwhelmed by numbers, dragged away, stoned to death, mocked in his last agonies. Where was his God? This was the reply. Did God then do nothing for Stephen? Was the first Christian martyr quite abandoned? Was there no seal or token of divine presence and care given to that suffering man? Go to Stephen himself for an answer; and when he, outraged and dishonoured, said with his dying breath, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge,"—to have wrought in the human soul, under circumstances so tragic and terrible, a desire like that, was to do more for Stephen than if he had been lifted up by myriads of angels out of the hands of his murderers and set in the sun! Do not let us forget God's spiritual gifts to us,—gifts of nature, of soul, qualities of heart, sublime views of truth, nobleness of tone under

circumstances that are trying and exasperating. Did he do nothing for Stephen? Go to Stephen himself for the reply. Though the stones were falling upon him and he was in the last agonies, he said in a whisper, the sound of which shall survive the voices of all thunders and floods, "I see heaven opened, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." It is only in crises, in extremities such as these, that the highest reach of faith is realised, and that faith itself becomes victory.

Then the very absence of God, being dictated by wisdom, and controlled by love, must be intended to have a happy effect upon human faith. Sometimes we say, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." There is a deep truth in that common sentiment. Once God said to people mourning his absence, "For a small moment,"—such as no chronometer ever measured the duration of,—“For a small moment I have forsaken thee, but with everlasting mercies—(billion upon billion of mercies)—will I gather thee, restore thee, comfort thee, and assure thee.” When God is absent, what if his absence be intended to excite enquiry in our hearts? When God is absent, what if his absence be intended to develop the trust of our nature? It is in having to grope for God we learn lessons of our own blindness, and weakness, and spiritual incapacity. We know not what God may be working out for us in the very act of withdrawing himself for a small moment, and for a space immeasurably minute.

I conclude with one gentle word which will help all men, for every one has dark days, and sadnesses, and troubles. There is not a man who has not in his heart, or who has not had in his heart, or who will not have in his heart, some shadow, pain, trouble, unrest. It is the common lot, and it has meaning in it. One day we may be able to piece all these things together and see them shaping themselves into a merciful purpose. Let me speak one gentle word. Take out your memorandum-books, and let me make an engagement for you. But you need not take out your diary, because I know that you have no engagement for the day which I am going to mention. How do I know that there is a vacancy in your diary? Because all history tells me that it is so. It is impossible to be mistaken in this matter. So you

need not look into your memorandum-book, because there is a vacant place there which I now want to fill up. "Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will answer thee." Now you have no engagement for the day of trouble! You have not. Your friends do not want to see you in the day of trouble. They do not want to open the door to a man who has a burden upon his back. They say, "Call upon us in the summer time, call upon us when thou art garlanded with blossoms; call upon us when thy hands are laden with fruit; come when fortune is propitious, when the winds are southerly, when there is blue sky overhead." But you have no engagement for the day of trouble. God therefore comes and asks that that day may be his. That very conception ought to convert men instantly. If it were but a dream it ought to secure immortality for the writer. It is one of those short sentences which, were it but a scintillation of human fancy, ought to cause the author to have pedestals and columns to his memory, as long as the sun shall shine.

We claim it to be a divine revelation, a fatherly truth, a message out of God's great heart. "Casting all your care upon him, for he *careth* for you." Observe the reasoning. He does not say, "Casting all your care upon him, for he is powerful; casting all your care upon him, for he is wise; casting all your care upon him, for he is infinite." These things never would have touched us; we could have escaped all that kind of reasoning. But casting all your care upon him, for he *careth* for you! Sympathy is his challenge. He *careth* for you! That is the ground of meeting. Sympathy is power; sympathy is omnipotence; sympathy is omniscience; sympathy is infinitude of mercy and blessing and sufficiency, when found in God. This is his gentle word: "Cast all your care upon me, for I *care* for you!"

## Chapter xxxvii.

### THE DISTRESS OF HEZEKIAH.

THE first picture that strikes us in this chapter is that of a panic-stricken king. When Hezekiah heard the messages from Assyria he rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord. The king and his ministers all clothed themselves in the penitential sackcloth of mourners. Hezekiah was probably weak in body, and therefore had lost true courage of soul. None knew better than he the overwhelming resources of Assyria, and if for a moment he surrendered his faith in God, he knew that the fate of himself and his people was sealed. In all ages the people of God have really had nothing to trust to but God himself. Their temptation, therefore, was to look without, to reckon up resources of a military kind, and discovering the inadequacy of such resources to meet the exigencies of the time they were prone to fall into despair. It has always been difficult to trust the purely spiritual. Given, on the one hand, a boundless army with boundless resources, and given, on the other hand, nothing but simple religious faith, and it is easy to see how men constituted as we are, may incline to seize the soldiery and the armour, and to put their confidence in resources of a palpable kind. The history of providence has been an intentional rebuke of such foolish confidences. They that trust in the Lord are to be as mount Zion; they who believe are to have perfect peace in the midst of storm; they who have the eyes of their hearts enlightened can see infinite hosts gathering around them, though there be nothing patent to the naked eye. In the midst of his distress Hezekiah sent "unto Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz." So far Hezekiah was right. He might have gone himself directly by an act of faith to the living God, but he had regard to the constitution of Israel, and

he availed himself of the ordinances and institutes appointed of heaven. Hezekiah made through Eliakim a pathetic speech to Isaiah—"This day is a day of trouble, and of rebuke, and of blasphemy" (ver. 3). There are hours, as we have often seen, when prophets come to the enjoyment of their fullest influence. Isaiah had been despised and derided, but now his hour has come, and he stands up as the one hope of Judah. The question was, What can you, Isaiah, do to extract Israel from all the peril which now presses upon the people of God? In the sixth verse we see how nobly the attitude of Isaiah contrasts with the attitude of Hezekiah. Instead of the word of inspiration proceeding from the king it issued from the prophet.

Thus saith the Lord, Be not afraid of the words that thou hast heard, wherewith the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. Behold, I will send a blast upon him, and he shall hear a rumour, and return to his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land (vers. 6, 7).

This was the message which the Lord sent through Isaiah to King Hezekiah. A terrible thing is it for the Lord to determine to send a blast upon a man. The better rendering is, "I will put a spirit in him;" the word *spirit* may represent an impulse, mighty and overwhelming, which makes havoc of all previous resolutions and purposes, and indeed drives the man to madness. The Lord troubles the faculties of our nature. He causes us to see sights which have no existence, and to hear voices which are pure suppositions of the fancy. Thus, the king of Assyria was to "hear a rumour;" it might be a mere noise in the ear, it might be of real danger gathering in some distant quarter; or this may be an instance of that prescience which foresees far away the complications of statecraft which drive to despair the sagacity of the shrewdest kings. Whatever may be the precise meaning of the words, it is evident that the Lord takes the whole affair into his own hands, and drives about the king of Assyria as men drive a horse in whose mouth they put a bit and bridle. When the Lord proposes to smite a man as with a sword of lightning, there is a dignity about his reply which makes us pause in wonder and in awe; but when he simply undertakes to trouble the brain, to frighten the eyes, to create an uproar in the ears, we begin to feel how terrible a thing it is to fall into the hands of

the living God. We should fix our attention upon the position occupied by Isaiah in this time of exigency. What are prophets for if not to declare the will of God in the midst of thickening danger? What are ministers of the Gospel for, if they dare not stand up in times of political conflict and social distress, and lay down the law of eternal righteousness? There is no need for them to intermeddle with the mere details of policy, or to range themselves in the spirit of partisanship on this side or that, but as ministers of Christ, who came to save the lost, to help the helpless, to open the eyes of the blind, and work miracles of beneficence, they are bound to speak a word for those who are cast down, to rebuke all tyranny, monopoly, and oppression, and to declare the word of hope in the ears of men who are being driven by misfortune into dejection and despair. A woful day will it be for the Christian Church when ministers speak nothing but sentiment, and occupy a position so remote from the actual affairs of the day as really to involve them in nothing that is of the nature of pain, loss, and sacrifice. The ancient prophets came down amongst the people, took their place amongst them, heard all the messages that were delivered by foreign sovereigns, and declared the will of the Lord respecting all the events of the time. Prophets and ministers will be quickly allowed to retire to "some boundless contiguity of shade," if they prefer to live a monastic life and to speak only those platitudes which have no reference to the dangers and the sufferings of the present hour. It is not enough for us to admire Isaiah, a prophet who lived thousands of years ago, when he stood up and delivered the word of God in the hearing of the messengers of the king of Assyria: Isaiah's heroism will be wholly lost if it be not copied by ourselves, and so embodied as to have a direct bearing upon all the action and purpose of the day in which we toil.

A beautiful picture is presented in the fourteenth verse, in which Hezekiah receives a threatening letter, and goes up into the house of the Lord, and spreads it before the Lord. This may be described as an action of mute worship. Possibly not a word was said. The letter was simply laid out before the presence of the all-seeing God. Sometimes this is the only thing we can



do in the midst of trying providences. We have exhausted all thought, all words, all skill in fence, and our arms now fall powerless by our side: in such circumstances we can but lay the case before God in eloquent silence. He knows what we mean by the act, and in proportion as our spirit is true in its tone towards him will he reply to us. In a moment Hezekiah was enabled to speak, and he offered a most pathetic prayer.

"O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, that dwellest between the cherubims; thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth: thou hast made heaven and earth. Incline thine ear, O Lord, and hear; open thine eyes, O Lord, and see: and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which hath sent to reproach the living God. Of a truth, Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations, and their countries, and have cast their gods into the fire: for they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone: therefore they have destroyed them. Now therefore, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou art the Lord, even thou only" (vers. 16-20).

The tone of sublimity which marks this address cannot be overlooked. In Psalm lxxx. 1 we have an expression like that which Hezekiah uses when he says "that dwellest between the cherubims"—an expression which is supposed to refer to the dark thunderclouds of heaven. In this case the reference is supposed to be to the glory-cloud which was the symbol of the divine presence, and which rested when it manifested itself between the cherubim of the ark—figures which symbolise the elemental forces of the heavens. Rabshakeh had spoken of "the gods of the nations," but Hezekiah speaks another faith—"thou art the God, even thou alone." We must never forget that monotheism was the faith of Israel. Never was Israel allowed to suppose that God was many and not one. The majesty of the Lord lay in his unity, and not in his divisibleness. This may be called the majesty of simplicity, in contradistinction to the majesty of number, variety, and complication. Now Hezekiah cast the whole difficulty into the hands of the Lord, his plea being that if God would defend Judah, and deliver his chosen Israel, all the kingdoms of the earth would know that God was the Lord, and there was none beside him. It is curious to observe how, by a kind of necessity, we all endeavour to give motives to the Divine Being which may direct his action and account for it. God does not disallow this worship of what may be called suggestive-

ness. Properly viewed, can anything be more out of reason and out of place, than that man should supply not only a prayer which expresses his necessity, but should suggest reasons on which God himself should act? Throughout the whole commerce of heaven and earth God continually reveals himself to us in condescending forms, and permits himself to be treated in many cases as if he were open to suggestion and reason and eloquence on our part. This is one method of the divine education of the world. Men are driven to find reasons for themselves and to suggest reasons to God, and the whole process may end in mental enlargement, or in intellectual illumination, or in the proof that it is not in man to find reasons but in God to supply both the motive and the end of his actions. Hezekiah's prayer is in some respects a model petition. He lays the whole case before God, and then speaks aloud concerning it. He reviews the history of Assyrian gods; he has seen them one by one cast into the fire: for they were no gods but the work of men's hands, yea, gods that could be destroyed by the very hands that made them; but now Hezekiah's heart rises in a sublime appeal to the eternity which cannot be shortened, to the infinity that cannot be diminished, to the almightiness whose energy can never be modified. The very making of such an appeal stirs and ennobles the heart and brings every faculty to its highest temper and power. This, indeed, is one of the best uses of prayer, namely, the enlargement of soul which follows it, the glow which makes the whole heart glad, and the sense of divine nearness which inspires timidity itself with invincible courage.

Now Isaiah the son of Amoz sends a message unto Hezekiah, and his message constitutes probably the last of Isaiah's recorded utterances, which is undoubtedly one of the sublimest bursts of eloquence attributed even to his inspired lips. It would seem as if the Lord replied to Hezekiah's prayer through the instrumentality of Isaiah, for Isaiah begins his answer to Hezekiah, saying, "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Whereas thou hast prayed to me against Sennacherib king of Assyria: this is the word which the Lord hath spoken concerning him." This is remarkable as showing in how many ways we may receive answers to prayer. It could not have been thought that the

Lord would answer a prayer addressed to him by sending a message through some other man. But thus we are to look for answers to our petitions. We cannot tell how the reply will come—by man, or woman, or child, or unexpected event, or unknown correspondent, or impressions produced upon the mind apparently without any ability on our part to trace their origin or account for their suddenness or their emphasis. We should always be looking for answers to prayers, not always by lifting up our heads and directing our eyes to the far-away heavens; we should open our ears to listen to the words which are being spoken immediately around us, for in the common conversation of the day we may receive some hint as to the destiny and effect of our own prayers. According to the answer which Isaiah was inspired to give to Hezekiah, the virgin daughter of Zion was enabled to despise those who sought to overthrow her, and to laugh to scorn those who had meditated evil things against her beauty and her virtue. The virgin daughter hurls back every taunt of Assyrian pride, and proceeds from one degree of contempt to another, until she inflicts upon the enemy the most signal humiliation. The Assyrians were to be as the grass of the field; they were to be as a field before the blades, or they were to be blasted as with mildew, or they were to be cast into the oven and destroyed; as for proud Assyria, a hook was to be put into his nose and a bridle into his lips, and he was to be turned back by the way by which he came. It is instructive to notice that the Assyrian sculptures represent both beasts and men as dragged in this way. Thus, in Ezek. xxxviii. 4, we read:—"And I will turn thee back, and put hooks into thy jaws, and I will bring thee forth, and all thine army, horses and horse-men, all of them clothed with all sorts of armour, even a great company with bucklers and shields, all of them handling swords."

"And this shall be a sign unto thee, Ye shall eat this year such as groweth of itself; and the second year that which springeth of the same: and in the third year sow ye, and reap, and plant vineyards, and eat the fruit thereof" (ver. 30).

In this verse the prophet turns to Hezekiah, and offers him pledges sufficiently near to assure him that all the prophecies

of larger scope were perfectly literal in their intent. It is supposed that the time of the address was autumn, probably near the Equinox, which was the beginning of a new year. The best historians tell us that the Assyrian invasion had stopped all tillage in the previous spring, and the people had to rely upon the spontaneous products of the fields. "In the year that was about to open they would be still compelled to draw from the same source, but in twelve months' time the land would be clear of the invaders, and agriculture would resume its normal course, and the fulfilment of this prediction within the appointed limit of time would guarantee that wider promise that follows." Thus the providence of the Lord confirms itself. Sometimes we have a remote promise stretching far away beyond the ages, and which the living men can never hope to see fulfilled, but in order to assure their faith and brighten their hope, something is promised to them which they can immediately realise. Thus from point to point, and from day to day, we are drawn forward, we are drawn forward by the good hand and the living Spirit of God.

The prophet says, "The zeal of the Lord of hosts shall do this" (ver. 32). It was not to be done by human energy, but wholly accomplished by divine wisdom and power. We may so look at prophecies of a large significance as to be overwhelmed by the range of time through which they had to pass, and thus we may blind ourselves and actually overpower our own faith; whereas we ought continually to look at the living God, and the eternity in which he dwells, and to feel that everything is in his hands, and that how great soever the time required it is as nothing compared with the eternity in which he lives.

## Chapter xxxviii.\*

### HEZEKIAH WARNED.

"In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came unto him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live" (ver. 1).

EVERYTHING depends upon when that notice comes. Often the tenant of the body has been known to long for the termination of his lease. Hezekiah was not in that position, and he had no right to be in it. To have cut him off then would certainly have been to deprive him of the residue of his years, as he himself complains. Here is a man who was warned of his approaching death. Is there any peculiar significance in the announcement? There ought not to be. All life is a warning that we are going to die. Life is but a variety of death, so far as the body is concerned. We bring into the world with us the writing of dissolution, and if we live a day it is a marvel. We were born to die. Yet how wonderful it is that no man believes this in any practical sense, though every one acknowledges it as a commonplace,—yea, if it were told him that man is mortal he would smile upon the speaker as a person who was accustomed to utter truisms. As if it could ever be a truism that man must die! But we can debase anything: we can turn the sunlight to foul purposes; we can, so to say, harness the very lights of heaven, and make them take us down the wrong road. So it has come to pass, in our familiarity with the most solemn music that to say man must die is to utter a platitude. There is no platitude in death; when it comes it turns the commonplace into a surprise, a terror, a joy, a revelation. We should beware how we make unnecessary commonplaces in the literature of life. Better find out the inner, secret, deepest meaning of things, and

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\* See Note, *post*, p. 110.

abide by that, not heeding the foolish prating that would take us away into meanings that have no direct bearing upon the dignity, utility, and destiny of human life.

Not only was Hezekiah warned of his approaching dissolution, he was religiously warned. Isaiah was the man who was charged with the intelligence. How much depends upon the man who speaks to us when the message is soul-harrowing, distressing, fatal! But did Isaiah always speak with the right accent? Has not even Isaiah been charged with occasional harshness of tone? Was he upon this occasion somewhat exasperated with Hezekiah, and did he announce the intelligence rather abruptly than sympathetically? That we can never determine. The great fact we have to deal with is that the dissolution of man is religiously announced. It is not the physician who has found out that man must die, for whilst he is shaping that very sentence he himself drops down and is dead. That man must die is a religious announcement, a spiritual prophecy. Mortality is taught from heaven. We should, therefore, look for the religious acceptance of the intelligence. Every man knows that dogs die, that the beasts of the field were made to be slaughtered for man's use : but when man dies the revelation must not be made to him as a piece of scientific intelligence, it must be spoken to him tenderly, solemnly, religiously, in a tone that means prayer, though there be no direct attitude of adoration and suppliance. This is the great function of the religious prophets of the age. When they declare unto us that we must die, they deliver but half their message, nay, they do but begin to call attention to their message, for they are not sent to announce death only, but thus to awaken interest, solicitude, anxiety, and then to reply to all the yearning which they have excited and inspired, telling the souls who are thus aroused to attention what God is, and what life is, and what there is just behind the blue screen, the frail trembling curtain that we can almost see through. When the Church undertakes that business it will always draw around itself men in their best estate ; the flippant and the frivolous and the worldly may not be there, but sober-minded men, men who have been chastened by much experience, men who want to know the reality of things, will be



there, not to be affrighted, but to be attuned, prepared, and qualified for higher society.

Not only was Hezekiah warned, and religiously warned; he was considerably warned. He was not to die on the morrow, he was to have time to set his house in order. Sometimes we feel as if we would rather not have that time, and yet there is a merciful dispensation in the arrangement which gives a man an opportunity of calmly approaching the end. Sometimes we long to be stricken down, and taken up to heaven instantaneously: but what of those who survive; what of the shock, the pain, the distress, the demoralisation, of those who are thus suddenly themselves struck with a living death? Men should always be ordering their house with a view to the end. The modern phrase would be—Make your will: arrange your affairs: die wisely. Yet every man has notice. So we began, so we must continue. Who waits for a special message from heaven, saying, To-morrow thou shalt die? Every day is dying day; every day is birth day; every day is New Year's day; every day is Christ's anniversary: we do amiss to put things away at a time-distance, to write them down upon a calendar many pages thick: better bring into immediate view and realisation all the points of time that throb with spiritual inference, that burn with spiritual significance, so that we may walk wisely, safely, hopefully, and yet with a subdued triumphing, all the days of our life. Is it a surprise to you that you are going to die? It should be the best ascertained fact in all experience. "Every beating pulse we tell leaves but the number less." This is universally acknowledged, and yet universally trifled with: we do not want the acknowledgment, but the answer to it, in all steadfastness of faith, in all beneficence of life, in all sacred industry, in beneficent occupations. He is best prepared to die who is best prepared to live. He who lives well is always expecting death and always welcoming it, not in any fearful sense, but in the sense in which the slave expects the emancipator, the prisoner expects the knock on his door to announce that his release is at hand: in that sense men may live, and so living they die, yet cannot die. These are only literal contradictions, they are spiritual music, perfect entrancing harmony.

But Hezekiah's life was prolonged; he had an interview with the Giver of life—

"Then Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the Lord, and said, Remember now, O Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight" (vers. 2, 3).

And as he prayed he cried his very heart out; he rained his tears before the Lord. A man does not like to die at thirty-nine; he says, I have hardly begun yet; this is cutting me off in early manhood, and all my great enterprises have yet to be begun. The voice sounded naturally as it thus pleaded with the Lord. The old man wants to die; he says, I am living amongst strangers: who is he? and who is she? what are those people? what is their occupation? I do not know where I am: I will live in the sacred past. But the young man in middle life does not want to die. The child does not want to go to rest at nine o'clock in the morning. We feel as if we had a call to work, and that we must obey that call with all seriousness and diligence. The Lord heard the prayer, saw the tears, accommodated himself to human weakness, and prolonged the life. Has he not prolonged our lives? Is not this the very miracle he has been working in our own cases? Why sit down to this as if it were a difficulty never to be resolved into plain terms, when precisely the same thing took place in your experience and in many instances which you may probably know? Friends have gathered around us, and said, Farewell; they never expected to see us again, and, lo, by some means—how those means are defined will depend upon the spirit and temper of those who attempt the task—we have risen from the lowliest humiliation of the flesh, and have gone forth amongst men, and have entered upon a new estate of youthhood, and from that point have accomplished all the miracles of our life. Where we can seize a fact it is a loss to our spiritual nature when we fret ourselves away about a miracle. Hezekiah was permitted to proceed in the direction of completion of life; he was allowed to amend his life. A wondrous purpose was wrought out in regard to the succession upon the throne of Judah. But where is the miracle? By what perversity of mind do we always fix upon the wrong point? To give life was the miracle—not to prolong it. If God can give

life he can work no other miracle upon that life that will be equal to the creation of the life itself. What is it to add a few days to an existence already in action? But what must it have been to have started life, to have felt the first pulse, to have known that the universe was no longer solitarily inhabited, but was being peopled with men, or angels, or glowing seraphim, or by the angels that fly on mighty wings? No matter. To make life, or create it, or start it,—that is the miracle. The miracle is not how the devil came into existence, but how God himself began. Why will men always attack the wrong point as if it were a wonderful thing that a man should have fifteen years added to his life; and yet we omit the stupendous miracle that man ever began to live. Thus attack what mystery we may we only go backward and upward until we come to Deity himself. That is the mystery, and there is none other. After that, all is plain reading. The wayfaring man, how simple-minded soever, need not err in the reading of what God has written, or be he flying on swift steed through time he can still read the large writing, if he has sufficiently acquainted himself, according to his capacity and opportunity, with the mystery of God. Sometimes the Christian apologist is taunted because he only takes himself backward or upward to a greater mystery than the one which is the immediate subject of discussion. But why the taunt? It is at once irrational and unjust. There must be a stopping-place in finite thinking. Because I cannot touch the sky it does not follow that there is no sky. We must learn where to rest, where to stop, and where to pray.

Hezekiah's life was prolonged; the shadow on the dial was turned back. It was a wonderful dial; it was the dial of Ahaz, mayhap a mural dial, visible to Hezekiah when he lay in his sick-chamber; he may have actually seen the shadow going back. Some say it was a prolonged after-glow. Why trifle with the miracle? We know nothing about it, we have no answer to it; the Lord has given the fact, he has not given the explanation. Call it, if you please, a long eventime, a prolonged sunset. So be it. Did the man live after it? As a matter of fact, we know, according to history, that he did live after it, and became the father of his successor upon the throne of Judah, and did many

wonderful things. That is enough. As to dial and shadow and miracle, these must be to us symbolical of a providence which is mighty enough to do all these little things, and which has been doing in all the ages works compared with which these things are but trifles. Granting the almightiness of God, we need have no difficulty as to anything that has taken place; granting that God was before all things, and is above all things, and holds all things in the hollow of his hand, it ought to be easy for us to believe that he has done nothing but wonders, that miracles are the common-places of his government, and that to do aught but miracles would be to be less than God.

Here we must abide as to all such transactions or occurrences, for he who wishes to explain them simply wishes to be wise above that which is written.

How interesting it is to discover what Hezekiah really felt when he was in the pit of humiliation, and going down into the pit of corruption! A wondrous pensiveness there is in his tone:—

“I said in the cutting off of my days, I shall go to the gates of the grave: I am deprived of the residue of my years. I said, I shall not see the Lord, even the Lord, in the land of the living: I shall behold man no more with the inhabitants of the world” (vers. 10, 11).

Where is Christianity in this tone? We may not expect Christianity in Hezekiah as we find it in the Apostle Paul. In the whole of the New Testament we find a sense of welcome in the presence of death. Paul had “a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better:” he did not want to be unclothed, he did not care in any sense of self-will to be quit of the body, but if the Lord were to say to him, *Servant of mine, come up!* he would fly to him. The tone of the New Testament contrasts very instructively with the tone of the Old Testament in relation to death and the grave and the future. The New Testament is all future. Understand the sense in which that declaration is intended to be received. The Old Testament is historical, it lives in the past, it mourns the days that are gone, it sees the grave like a black line lying across the disc of to-morrow. The New Testament says in effect, *Men, stand up; proceed: you know nothing yet as it ought to be known: God lies in the future,*

all destiny is ahead, as for earth and death and the grave, they are to be overpast and overcome: we are to set our feet upon them, and our motto is to be, Onward, ever onward! There is no limit to the Church, the sanctuary, the heaven of God. A book so charged with enthusiasm must help men to live. It would be weary to die in any house where that book had no place. Truly we should be going down through a valley of darkness into a pit of humiliation. But where the book lives and speaks and burns and cheers, they who die say, O, the pain, the bliss of dying! Tell me, my soul, can this be death? I long to be with Jesus: O death, where is thy sting? I feared thee once as a monster, I can now welcome thee as a grim friend: come, do thy work, break the last link, and let me fly into heaven. The New Testament is nowhere charged with dejection, with fear, with gloom; nowhere does it say, Be careful how far you go, because you may go too far. The New Testament has abolished death, and made it possible for all men to live. Said the Son of God, who is the New Covenant, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."

How Hezekiah round in all the nature round about him just what he wanted in his mood of dejection!—"Like a crane or a swallow, so did I chatter: I did mourn as a dove" (ver. 14). He takes this, however, as an example of what he himself felt, when their voice of mourning was heard. Instead of "a swallow" read, "the swift"—"like a crane or the swift. . . . Then I did mourn as a dove." We hear what we want to hear. Nature will help us in any mood. Sweet mother, sweet nurse, best, tenderest of friends, next to the Father! Nature herself seems to be always speaking in a minor tone; here and there, and now, and once more, she may break into loud and vivacious singing, but when she is, so to say, left to herself, how she lowers her voice, how she sobs and moans, and comes down to human sorrow, as if to claim kinship with all the griefs of the heart! Call her mother, and go as near worshipping her as you can, for she is the garment and tenement of God.

Hezekiah said, "O Lord . . . undertake for me:" literally, be surety for me; death has come to claim his bill, and I do not



want to pay it, I want to live : speak to him, undertake to be my surety ; tell him that he shall have me by-and-by, but let it be a long by-and-by : Lord, step into the breach, satisfy the death claim, and give me a broad margin of life. This was the appeal of Hezekiah. He said, "Behold, for peace I had great bitterness" (ver. 17). This misrepresents the thought of the man ; it should be otherwise—namely, thus :—through great bitterness I got peace. The aloes was a bitter medicine, but what good it wrought, how it operated like a tonic, how it made me healthier and stronger altogether ! I got peace through bitterness : "Thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption,"—literally, thou hast loved me out of the pit, drawn me by love out of the pit of corruption. This was the experience of Hezekiah. It may be our experience. The purpose of God's love is to draw us away from all pits, dejections, humiliations, prostrations, and to give us life, vigour, triumph, sense and guarantee of immortality.

"The living, the living, he shall praise thee" (ver. 19). That is the object of life. If we are using life for any other end, we are misusing it ; we are arrested as felons in creation. Life is a sacred thing, a religious gift, a holy trust, and it is handed to us that we may make it an instrument of divine praise. Marvelous life ! no man has seen it ; it will not be looked at. It may be seen in incarnation, in temporary form, in some transient phase, but itself will never be gazed upon. Men have attempted to surprise life, but they have always failed in their endeavour. They have said, Let us quietly withdraw the veil, and see the angel. They have withdrawn the veil, and lost their labour. No man ever yet saw his own pulse. Tear off the skin, open all that wondrous mechanism,—where is it ? Gone ! It will not be found, touched, weighed, painted. You can paint form, but you cannot paint life. You say, That eye wants fire, that head wants dignity, the whole frame wants the accent which is vital. Give it ! The artist may partially succeed, but one lifting of an infant's hand throws all the artist's skill away like a vain thing. One flash of the eye of anger, one gleam of the eye of love, one touch of friendship,—who can paint these, represent these ? We can only speak of them, and remember them, and



hide them in our grateful hearts : but to speak of them is almost to destroy them ; they love the temple of silence, they delight in the sanctuary of holy things. Who will live unto the Lord's praise ? who will say, I will now sing unto the Lord as long as I live : God helping me, no longer shall my life be mean, and empty, and poor, vicious, sophistical, self-seeking ; hence on by God's help as revealed in Christ's Cross I will praise the Lord ? Then we shall come to see what life can really rise to, and embody, and realise. No man yet knows what is in him : you have more intellect than you have yet supposed ; you have greater capacity than you have yet measured ; you only need the right inspiration, and out of you there will come sparks of fire, and as it were in the very hem of your garment there will be healing, and all life will be a blessing to all other life.

Do not believe that you have attained your majority, that you are now going down the hill, that you have left life to others. In Christ Jesus we shall live to the very last. The last of your days shall be amongst the brightest jewels of your time. He who lives in Christ never tires ; he is fed with energy divine, he is sustained from on high ; he has indeed a long after-glow. And there are those who have not scrupled to say that, beauty for beauty, the prize must be given to eventide.

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### NOTE.

"From 720, when chap. xi. may have been published, to 705—or, by rough reckoning, from the fortieth to the fifty-fifth year of Isaiah's life—we cannot be sure that we have more than one prophecy from him ; but two narratives have found a place in his book which relate events that must have taken place between 712 and 705. These narratives are chap. xx. : How Isaiah Walked Stripped and Barefoot for a Sign against Egypt, and chaps. xxxviii. and xxxix. : The Sickness of Hezekiah, with the Hymn he wrote, and his Behaviour before the Envoys from Babylon. The single prophecy belonging to this period is chap. xxi. 1-10, *Oracle of the Wilderness of the Sea*, which announces the fall of Babylon."—REV. G. A. SMITH, M.A.

## Chapter xxxix.\*

### HEZEKIAH'S MISTAKE.

THIS short chapter is full of dramatic incident and colour and suggestion. It is human life condensed into almost the briefest possible compass. Hezekiah had indeed been sick—sick nigh unto death, and he did not want to die at nine-and-thirty years of age, as we have seen ; so he turned his face unto the wall, and cried, and prayed, and wrestled with God, if haply he might continue in existence and see the unfolding of the residue of his days. The Lord heard the moan, and added fifteen years to the life of the king. And now he is no sooner better than he makes a fool of himself ! He receives a letter from the king of Babylon, takes the messengers into all the secret places, empties all the boxes of the palace, and says, You see what I have of silver and gold, and things precious and valuable. This comes of getting well again ! Well for some of us had we died long ago ! Well if the child had not recovered. But you would have it so. The father might have been inclined to give way and say, If so be he must go, Lord take him with an almost visible hand : but it will be hard at the best. But the mother would not have it so ; she said, No : he must live : spare him, Lord ! I cannot live without the child. Sometimes the Lord grants us our requests, and then sends leanness into the soul. Sometimes he may have allowed us to have our own way in prayer ; sometimes we have been permitted in a great wrestling to throw the Almighty : but what has come of it ? Many a mother has lived to say with heartache to her child : Would God you had died an infant ! for then you would have gone straight up to heaven as the dew goes up to help to make the rain-bows : but I could not give you up, I was wrong—God pity me for

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\* See Note, *post*, p. 119.

my selfish ignorant prayer! Why will we take things into our own hands? Here is selfishness. Who can escape that bane? Were it something outside of us we might smite it, but it is within, it is mixed up with our life, it *is* our life. Herein is the mystery of the Cross of Christ, that it comes to slay self—"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." This was the testimony of Paul. To this ideal we may come, not frivolously, irreverently, or by flux of time, but by the ever-working grace of God, the continual miracle of the Holy Ghost. It takes God a long time to make Christians of some men.

Did Hezekiah act the part of a frank spirit upon this occasion? Nothing of the kind. We now begin to see more of the man's quality than we have ever seen. If a doctor had cured him he could not have been less religious in his communication with the delegates from Babylon; if some adventurous quack had brought him from the brink of the grave he could not have said less about it. Not a word was said, according to the record, of the tears, the prayers, the prophetic interventions and communications; nothing was said of the religious element and action in all the movement. It is even so with ourselves. When we are congratulated upon our recovery it is hard for some of us to be religious, and to say, This is God's hand, this is God's miracle: truly I was brought to the very jaws of death, but I prayed mightily to God to spare me if he would, and I owe it to him wholly that I am alive this day: the living, the living shall praise him, and I will not be ashamed of my song. O ye dumb beneficiaries of God, taking his light and not owning the Giver, receiving his morning, and his noontide, and his evening, receiving the "spring blooms that burgeon o'er the world," and his autumnal largesses, and never singing loud, sweet, public song to him. Is this just? Is this honest? Is it in any wise, or sense, or aspect, good? If men would but follow the inspiration of gratitude a new face would be put upon all Christian life. Why are we dumb about God's gifts? It would shock us to hear some men use the name of God piously; we should receive from

such an acknowledgment the shock of surprise, it would be so unlike the speaker. He is fluent enough in commercial talk, in worldly conversation; he can bargain like a Jew; but to speak God's name reverently, to say lovingly and simply, "God raised me up from the grave, blessed be his name; I want to serve him now with both hands diligently; no work too lowly for me to do, if so be he will allow me to do it and accept the doing as a sacrifice,"—if men would say this, the old days of enthusiasm would return, and the Church, instead of dying of a dumb respectability, would be alive with an inspired sensationalism. Beware of any man that speaks against sensationalism in the Church, unless he define his terms; he may be but excusing himself for a frost-bound piety. What a missionary Hezekiah might have been! How he would have astounded the Babylonian delegates had he said to them: I receive you with respect, courtesy, and thankfulness, but I must tell you of this miracle; come within, and you shall hear how it was, how it began, continued, culminated; this will be something for you to tell when you go home again. In this way every man might create a home missionary field for himself. "Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul," and I will speak publicly of his name, and proclaim his mercies even to reluctant ears: I will not play a thief's part, and take heaven's blessings as a felon might take them; I will receive them, and return thanksgiving unto God in loud public praise, and men shall know that what I have I have not by right or claim, but because of the condescension and love and pity of God. Let yourself be your text in all your best experiences. Let the facts of your family life be your texts if you are afraid to quote the Scriptures. The man who wants to preach can find texts enough in the infinite drama, the infinite tragedy of human life.

Hezekiah received the messengers and was glad of them, and showed them all that he had in his house. Bad men can never do good deeds. Could we get this lesson engraven on the memory, and made the light of life in many of our social relations, our preaching in that direction might fitly terminate. Merodach-baladan was a bad man; he could therefore not be courteous in any deep, true, and lasting sense of the term. A

corrupt tree cannot grow good fruit. He was a rebel himself; he had thrown off the old king's yoke, and set up an independence of his own in a spirit of defiance and pagan self-sufficiency. His record was not a good record. When the bad man wants to do you a service do not accept it. If he bring you flowers from the garden, he has chilled their juices, and he has looked a curse upon them; if he bring you fruit from the orchard, take care: the hands that plucked that fruit have stolen God's righteousness and defied God's commandment. Bad men cannot be civil, courteous, noble, in any element or quality of life. Only the good man can be courteous, chivalrous, a gentleman. Herein the Church must reclaim much of its stolen property in the way of nomenclature and definition. We say of some men, Though not Christians, they are very honourable. No! I protest against that award: temporarily honourable, superficially honourable, relatively honourable; but honourable is a word that goes right down to the roots, and in that sense no man can be honourable who has not made his peace with God. And as for the courtesy and the civility of those who do not know Christ, verily it is veneer, plating that can be rubbed off, a little decoration that can be bought at school, a simple acquirement that can be paid for if you hire the right posture-master. Courtesy is a branch of philanthropy, and philanthropy is a branch of theology, and true theology begins at and returns to the Cross of Christ. So whatever this Merodach-baladan did, he was a rebel. Would you praise the dog that worried your child because the beast had a well-chased brass collar round his cruel throat? Would you say, Forgive the assassin, for he struck me with a hand that had a diamond gleaming upon its white finger? No: under such circumstances you would be real, you would go down to things fundamental. This is what we want in all the relations of life: go to roots, study the core of things, and unless the fountain is pure the stream cannot be pure; if the well-head is right then the water oozing, bubbling, sparkling, flashing from it will be of its own quality. Make the tree good, and the fruit will be good; make the fountain pure, and the stream will be pure: not until our hearts are right with God can they be right with one another. There can be no philanthropy without Christianity. There can be a show of it,

there can be a happy mimicry of it, there can be a cunning theft of many of its features; but only that is philanthropy which does not shrink from the Cross, only that is philanthropy which saves others, itself it cannot save.

Hezekiah was pleased with the Babylonian compliment. He said, Gentlemen, come in, and I will show you all I have got here. So he "shewed them the house of his precious things, the silver, and the gold, and the spices, and the precious ointment, and all the house of his armour, and all that was found in his treasures: there was nothing in his house, nor in all his dominion, that Hezekiah shewed them not" (ver. 2). He was a trustful man! You can get everything out of some men if you have the key of their vanity. Look at Hezekiah; as he takes the men round he says in effect, What an ally I would make if Babylon should ever be in trouble! Or, What an opponent I would make if ever Babylon should be insolent! Or, You see I am one of the great powers of the world. We want large quotation marks for "great powers"! This is the danger of all uncontrolled and unsanctified power, or position, or possibility of dominion: much would be more, more would be most, and most would explode because of its own dissatisfaction.

Was this all Hezekiah had to show? There is nothing in it then. All these things can be stolen. A half-educated thief could take away the silver and the gold; a very young felon could take away the spices and the precious ointment; a man with very poor resources could carry off the armour. Hezekiah laid up his riches where thieves could break through and steal. Ah me, how like us all this is! What should he have shown to the men from Babylon? What we ought to show to every enquirer into our method of life—individual, domestic, municipal, and national: he should have shown them character, high citizenship, large education, self-control, developed to its highest point of discipline,—these are things which no king of Babylon can take away. Nobody can steal the schooling you have given to your boy, but many people could easily take away his silver watch. Feed his brain; nourish his soul; under the blessing of God, seek to excite his appetite for knowledge, truth, wisdom, understanding: say to him, My son, seek them in the



dawn, and in the midday, and at eventide ; they are more precious than rubies : and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto wisdom : with all thy gettings, get understanding ; she shall preserve thee, love thee, turn the night into day, and make the day sevenfold in brightness, and spread summer beauty all round the year ; her ways are ways of pleasantness, her paths are paths of peace. Herein we take our stand as Christian teachers, preachers, expositors, evangelists, instructors of the young, occupants of the sanctuary. When we would show the riches of a country, show the altar of the land, show the church of the land, the schools of the empire, and say to Babylonian inquisitors, These are the foundations, and these, too, are the topstones ; this is a fabric that cannot be shaken down by military thunder, this is the temple of God. We can all have a hand in this masonry. He who builds a church builds a fortress. He who teaches a little child that God is love makes a soldier who never gives in. How difficult it is to get men to realise that the spiritual is mightier than the material ! There is not a merchantman in the city who would allow a stranger to come in and take one yard of silk from his counter without paying for it : yet any literary thief can come into the best church in the metropolis and steal the preacher's thoughts, and not a constable would interfere. Who cares about the spiritual ? whereas, there could be no material without the spiritual. A thought, who shall value it in plain figures, and set out its equivalent in gold and silver ? A prayer, that tender violence that storms the throne of God and brings down all grace and love and light, who heeds it ? Pay for the burned clay, pay for the tinted glass, pay for the artificial light : but who can pay for thought, sympathy, prayer, spiritual ministry, that secret power over the life which releases it from bondage, which takes away the garments of heaviness and in place of them gives the garments of praise.

Hezekiah seemed to have something which he could catalogue : —“Silver—gold—spices—ointment—armour.” “A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.” A man has what a man is. Who alone stood against excited vanity ; nay, who did not permit any such action of the mind as an excitement of vanity ? Only one Man. There came to him

on a certain day cunning interviewers, who began their plot with these insidious words—Master, we know that thou carest for no man, neither regardest the person of men—he laughed at them in his heart; he allowed the fools to proceed with their lie; then he said—Shew me a penny: whose image and superscription is this? Cæsar's. Let him have it! Where was the wit? It was with Christ. Amend that answer if you can, even from an intellectual point of view. It is even from a literary point of view perfect. His vanity, if we may with reverence use such a term in connection with such a name, was not excited; he was not the victim of flattery, or praise, or cruel eulogium. What wonder that men fell back from him and said, Better fight a Cæsar than speak to that man, unless you speak words of truth and soberness and love? Let the spirit of display once get into you even as a Church, and you may write Ichabod upon the temple door. The things to be shown in the Church are the Bible, the Altar, the Cross—"God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." If men come to our churches and see the precious things, the silver, and the gold, and the spices, and the ointment, and see no Cross, they will curse us in the day of account.

Now Isaiah enters upon the scene. Mark the difference in the tone of the two men:—

"Then came Isaiah the prophet unto king Hezekiah, and said unto him What said these men? and from whence came they unto thee? And Hezekiah said, They are come from a far country unto me, even from Babylon. Then said he, What have they seen in thine house? And Hezekiah answered, All that is in mine house have they seen: there is nothing among my treasures that I have not shewed them. Then said Isaiah to Hezekiah, Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: Behold, the days come, that all that is in thine house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store until this day, shall be carried to Babylon: nothing shall be left, saith the Lord" (vers. 3-6).

This is right. Hezekiah had never named the Lord's name. Will the Lord permit such insults to be hurled at his throne, and have no reprisals, judgments, retributions? Shall all this fool's prank be played out, and God have no answer? He is a listening God, and he takes note of our whole life. "Them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be

lightly esteemed." Woe unto you rich men who have no treasure except what you can hold in your hands, lock up in your safes, and write down in arithmetical ink. Woe unto you who bless not your bread before you eat : that bread shall minister to death, and not to life. Blessed, rich, are ye who over a broken crust can say, God be thanked ! it may become more before I finish it ; for even in the breaking of bread God turns the morsel into a feast.

It is well to have Isaiahs in society, for Hezekiahs could never keep it together. This is the tone we want. The prophet should be higher than the king. The Christian teacher should stand upon the topmost place. Herein we have given away too much, and receded in mock humility from our right position as prophets of the Lord. Who dare rebuke a king ? Who would not rather be pleased, and cut his prayer in two, if the king should say to him, Come and see me in my palace ? Who could preach after that ? The preacher is the greatest man living. The preacher of the Lord burns up other men like stubble, when they do that which is untrue, unwise, ungodly. Preachers do not take their proper position in this matter. They are quite willing to go in anyhow. Oh, they are so humble ! I am afraid they will end in jail, where such humility has ended before to-day. Why, son of man, if thou hadst God's fire in thee thou wouldst denounce governments if they were unpatriotic, turn out prime ministers if they offend the spirit of civilisation and justice and progress ; yea, thou wouldst not be afraid of the chief seat-holder, if he played Diotrophes, thou wouldst put thy hand upon his neck and give him to feel that thou canst do without bread and water, but not without justice and righteousness and truth. You are called, O ordained minister of Christ, to a proud position, a noble, illustrious, immortal function. The Church of Christ is not a place in which men can hear little sentiments which they may receive with the nod of an empty head ; it is not a place which is put up for the purpose of saying inoffensive nothings in. O Christ, we have not used thy house aright ; we have not uttered thy maledictions in thy tone ; we have not spoken thy beatitudes with thy tears : we have made thy house too small a place ; it might have been the greatest house in all the land, the

house of beauty and music and sympathy, the house of righteousness and truth and spiritual illumination, the house of prayer, of oath, of sacrifice; it might have been a precinct of heaven!

### NOTE.

"To the great national drama of Jerusalem's deliverance, there have been added two scenes of a personal kind, relating to her king. Chaps. xxxviii. and xxxix. are the narrative of the sore sickness and recovery of King Hezekiah, and of the embassy which Merodach-baladan sent him, and how he received the embassy. The date of these events is difficult to determine. If, with Canon Cheyne, we believe in an invasion of Judah by Sargon in 711, we shall be tempted to refer them, as he does, to that date—the more so that the promise of fifteen additional years made to Hezekiah in 711, the fifteenth year of his reign, would bring it up to the twenty-nine, at which it is set in 2 Kings xviii. 2. That, however, would flatly contradict the statement both of Isaiah xxxviii. 1, and 2 Kings xx. 1, that Hezekiah's sickness fell in the days of the invasion of Judah by Sennacherib; that is, after 705. But to place the promise of fifteen additional years to Hezekiah after 705, when we know he had been reigning for at least twenty years, would be to contradict the verse just cited, which sums up the years of his reign as twenty-nine. This is, in fact, one of the instances in which we must admit our present inability to elucidate the chronology of this portion of the Book of Isaiah. Mr. Cheyne thinks the editor mistook the siege by Sennacherib for the siege by Sargon. But as the fact of a siege by Sargon has never been satisfactorily established, it seems safer to trust the statement that Hezekiah's sickness occurred in the reign of Sennacherib, and to allow that there has been an error somewhere in the numbering of the years. It is remarkable that the name of Merodach-baladan does not help us to decide between the two dates. There was a Merodach-baladan in rebellion against Sargon in 710, and there was one in rebellion against Sennacherib in 705. It has not yet been put past doubt as to whether these two are the same. The essential is that there was a Merodach-baladan alive, real or only claimant king of Babylon, about 705, and that he was likely at that date to treat with Hezekiah, being himself in revolt against Assyria. Unable to come to any decision about the conflicting numbers, we leave uncertain the date of the events recounted in chaps. xxxviii., xxxix. The original form of the narrative, but wanting Hezekiah's hymn, is given in 2 Kings xx. [Isa. xxxviii., xxxix., has evidently been abridged from 2 Kings xx., and in some points has to be corrected by the latter. Chap. xxxviii., 21, 22, of course, must be brought forward before ver. 7]."—REV. G. A. SMITH, M.A.

## Chapter xl. 1-5.

### NEEDED COMFORT.

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God” (ver. 1).

IT sounds as if God had said it. There is something in voice. The music seems to come a long way, and to have lost nothing in its descent. We know music when we hear it. The heart knows what music it wants, what it needs, and where it can have it; and when it comes a glow of tender love testifies that God has spoken with the soul as man might speak with man, face to face. “Saith your God.” It was well to put in that word, though almost needless. We knew where the judgments came from which we have grieved from time to time. They were not noises of the earth, winds that were born in the dust, but great tempests from heaven, solemn judgments upon men, and upon cities, and upon nations, and it was time that something was said in another tone. The uproar has been infinite. The still small voice is the more precious. Yet we should not have valued the still small voice but for the tearing wind and the fire and all the artillery. It is because these things were so terrible in their mightiness, and so near in their crushing weight, that we listened to the still small voice with such eager interest and thankful appreciation. We know this in our own little life. We know how blue the sky is when the great frowning clouds have been driven away. It would not do to live always under summer skies, for even they would become commonplaces. Miracles may degenerate into platitudes. It is well to have change, variety, shock, trial; then when the morning breaks in silver, and all the hills are crowned with light, and all the birds say, It is Sabbath, let us sing to the praise of God, the heart knows that this is the very gift of divine love, and is its own witness, despising critic

and scorning sceptic. This is none other than the visitation of the Father, God.

Yet having said all this, it is that we may make room for this instructive and limiting, yet enlarging, observation—namely, that comfort does not mean only soothing, caressing, embracing. A very singular word is the word “comfort” all through the Bible. It is a kind of double word. We speak of a man being “a son of consolation,” and then we suppose him to be so quiet, to have only the eloquence of whispering, only the touch of soothing. He had all that, and more. The son of consolation is a man who can stimulate, awaken, rouse the sleeper; make a man conscious of his latent energy, and stir up the man that is within the man, so that he shall have boldness, distinctiveness of personality, consciousness of strength. So there be many sons of consolation who have not the name. You are consoled when you are strengthened; you are comforted when any spirit comes to you and finds for you the piece which you had lost, the energy which had fallen into desuetude, the faith that had lapsed, and bringing this lost piece to you says, Use it, and in the use of it recover your manhood. What comfort is there in soothing, caressing, embracing, quieting, mesmerising? That is really not comfort of an enduring or substantial kind. It was precious at the time, but it did not terminate in itself; if it put us to sleep it was that in sleep we might revive our energy, recruit our nerves, and bring up out of the forgetfulness of the night power and hope to serve the living God. Be thankful, therefore, to those men whom you have looked upon as being rather energetic than comforting, stimulating than soothing, and remember that Barnabas never would have been what he was if he could not prick, goad, stimulate, blister you into a larger consciousness. We shall find that we need all this view presently.

For here we have a comfort which is based on logic; and no other comfort is worth having. Let us not cry Peace, peace, when there is no peace; let us have no untempered mortar in building God's wall—that wall of security and protection, that sanctuary wall, every inch of which is written over with “Holiness unto the Lord.” This poet becomes logical. Believe no



word that is not rooted or founded upon a rock. You cannot live upon foam. You cannot dine healthily upon perfume. The flower is a decoration, not a substitution for what you need, and of what you really enjoy.

"Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem." Literally, speak to her heart (ver. 2). And having so spoken what shall the speech be?

"Cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

That sounds like rhetoric, but it is the sternest, sublimest logic. And what harm has rhetoric done to the world that men should sneer at it? If it should smooth the way for logic, let it do so; it may be a kind of Baptist-herald preparing the way for the reasoning of the mere letter. Why would God have Jerusalem comforted? Because "her iniquity is pardoned." Until that is done there can be no comfort. There are liars who tell you that you are to be comforted before you are pardoned. You cannot comfort the criminal until he breaks down, and says with sobs, God be merciful to me a sinner! I have done the things I ought not to have done: is there pity in all God's great heart for such a sinner as I am? God will not allow him to complete such a speech as that until he has assured him of pardon; he will fall upon his neck and kiss him, and say, My son, thy sins which are many are all forgiven thee; thou hast release; thou art a bond-man no more; rise and join the society of the blessed and free. The Church of Christ should have no comfort for bad men, except the comfort of telling them that they are bad and may whilst living repent. This is fundamental, and this alone is worth announcing. Preachers trifle with us when they tell us to be comforted from without. They are the right preachers—stern men—who say there is a cause for all this need of comfort; there is an explanation of all this distress, and the explanation is that the heart has gone astray from God; there must be a consideration of that treachery and alienation of soul, and until that matter is settled there can be no comfort. That would sound severely. Thank God for the severity that deals with the core, the root, the reality of the case; and shame be to those who murder souls by keeping back the need of pardon, and who conceal the only way of obtaining the pardon and realising its blessedness.

To whom does God speak? To "my people." In another part of the prophecies we read of a people who were not his people; they once were, but afterwards they were not; now they are again "my people." That indicates a process. A whole history is involved in that one word "my:" it means recovery, adoption, recognition, assurance, almost coronation; it indicates a new and tender relation, or the renewal of a relation ineffably tender and precious. It is not enough to be people, individuals, societies, nations, mere arithmetical hosts; we want the connecting word which binds us to the Great Heart. Not only am I a man, I am thy child, thou living God, take care of me, night and day, evermore. I could have the form and image of a man without that prayer, but not the joy of manhood, not the sense of dignity derived from him, who is the Son of man. Until we become religious we cannot be truly and deeply comforted; being religious we can never be truly and deeply discomforted: the wind plays upon the surface, but away down deep, and deeper still, is the spirit of joy and peace. Great peace have they that love thy law. So then this comfort is not a sentiment, it is the expression of a pardon, and it is the acknowledgment of a properly received and utilised punishment: "She hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins," and she has acknowledged it to be the Lord's hand. Then the punishment ceased. The moment we see God, and say, "It is the Lord," and kiss the hand and the rod that is in it, the punishment is over. Punishment never goes beyond submission or acceptance in the right spirit. It goes beyond questioning, and difficulty, and scepticism, and obstinacy; it keeps on, blow after blow, scourge upon scourge; but no sooner does the sufferer say, "It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth good in his sight; I deserve it all; if thou canst pity me thou wilt," than punishment has ceased, and heaven has descended into the heart.

Have we been punished for our sins? If not, there can be no comfort. We cannot have any half work in this matter; the great negative work must first be done before the positive and constructive can be initiated. Believe this, and do not attempt to reverse divine processes, and to walk backwards into the kingdom of heaven. Why should we attempt impossibilities,

when God comes to us in all sweetness and grace and tenderness and tells us the way of life, and offers us the blessing of his love? It is instructive and comforting to know that every consolation which God really gives comes after a process of discipline, a process of pardon, a process of punishment rightly received. We are all punished, we are all tried; the difference is in the way in which we receive the divine punishment. If we receive it as for sins it shall be well with us; then might God take away all we have. We have sinned against him with every finger; as for our feet they have been swift in the way of evil; our eyes have hunted creation for objects on which to feast their evil desires; our whole heart has been turned into a living lie; and now all other prayers must stand back until we use the only availing prayer—God be merciful to me a sinner! That prayer having cleansed the heart and cleansed the mouth, all other prayers may come, and they shall be uttered in the prevailing name with infinite success. You cannot begin your prayer at the other end; you cannot begin with the benediction; that comes last, it is the purple eventide of the religious day; you must begin with the cry for mercy, the acknowledgment of transgression and unworthiness, and, God's word for it, after that there will come ineffable peace, abounding, yea, with eternal joy.

Was the whole tragedy over, then? Is this a full stop to which we have come? No. God is loth to use the period. Has God any full stop in the literature of his reign and purpose and administration? The full stop is a human invention. There is no full stop with thee, thou Eternal One. The grave is not a full stop, it is an intermediate point, black enough, but quite momentary in its significance. So then, we have scarcely received the comfort, so rational and so profound, than there is a sound of trumpets, the cry as of a herald, the blast as of an instrument held and used by one who has news to tell.

"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (ver. 3).

Yes, truth lives in the future, as well as in the past. It is the coming eternity, as well as the eternity gone—if we may so use words for purposes of accommodation—that should be filled and

glorified by the spirit of truth. There is always a better day to dawn. We have seen nothing yet, except that which is symbolic and initial, prophetic and assuring. Jesus Christ himself used the word "hereafter" more than once—"Hereafter ye shall see." We may, therefore, expect the Lord every day, not in some literal and measurable sense (in which we could not receive him), but in the deep, profound, universal, spiritual sense, which says: Thus thy kingdom come, thus thy will be done! In some lower mood, quite cold and straitened in itself, I want to see Christ in the flesh, but it is soon felt to be a vain hope and a foolish expectation. Christ must come in truth, in spirit, in salvation, in that sense of nearness which is the true association, in that consciousness of blessing which is better than mere proximity. What a wonderful word is this—"Prepare"! It is a word that involves labour, and labour of a most difficult kind. What is to be done? The programme is set down here in plain figures—make straight the highway, work in the desert, fill up the valleys, bring down the mountains, make the crooked straight, and the rough places plain. Have we to be engaged in this kind of work? Yes. It is hard—very. It is negative—undoubtedly. What will happen when it is done? This: Hear it, and be comforted in the sense of being inspired:—

"And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (ver. 5).

If that could be so, then no work would be too hard, no sacrifice too comprehensive, no patience too long-suffering. That is the issue. It has not come yet. Has the preparation come? Have we done our part? God will not come until the way is completed. We are to do this preparatory work, and then who shall tell what will take place? It is enough for us. It is honour enough for any mortal to say "God is love;" it is crown enough to be permitted to bear the cross: it is heaven enough for the present time and space to be a hewer of wood, a drawer of water, a keeper of the door, a lighter of the lamp—only let me dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. Let us comfort one another with these words. There is no comfort equal to that which coming after pardon is found in hard work. Work obliterates the timepiece. There is no time to him who toils, in the spirit of

the living God, and because he loves the work of God ; there is no pain, because of the larger consciousness, the ennobled personality, the immediate touch and blessing of God. Weary not in well-doing, for in due season ye shall reap if ye faint not. Thus God cheers us by some talk of reaping. He knows we do not like the sowing time of the year, because it is cold ; so he tells us, as we might tell children, that we shall go a-harvesting. Thus he pleases his infantile followers ; he says, "To-morrow you shall take out your sickles, and go into the fields, which are white unto the harvest, or golden unto the time of reaping, and under a blue sky, and to the accompaniment of singing birds, you shall reap all day, and come home at night blithe and thankful, because of the largeness of the harvest." This is condescending love. We have come into the reaping time of history. There have been sowing times, rough times, when the east wind blew, and when men had to go out into bare places to plough, to rip up the earth, and to cast in seed, knowing they would never see it grow, unless they were permitted to look upon the harvest fields in time from the heights of eternity. Other men have laboured, we have entered into their labours. But for what other men have done we could not meet in the house of God to-day. The living men of the age did not build the houses of prayer, except in a temporary and easily measurable sense. That we can put two stones together, one on the top of another, with the meaning that we are building walls that shall be roofed in and measure off a sanctuary, is the result of labour that took place centuries ago. The dead have given us our privileges. There would have been no harvest for the living, but for what men now in heaven have done upon the earth. The dead loom upon us, large and solemn, not to show their greatness, but to show to what bigness we may grow. He is a poltroon, a man who has cut off his thumbs that he might not be able to go to the war, who remembers not that every privilege he holds to-day he holds because other men went forward to exalt valleys, level mountains and hills, straighten crooked things, and make rough places plain. They had hard times in the days of old ! Let us take care that our halcyon days do not enfeeble us, take out of our life all the juices of its energy, and leave us flaccid, feeble, worthless.

Let us, then, abide in the comfort of God ; let us be thankful for the explanation given to us that the word comfort means more than mere soothing and consolation ; that true consolation means inspiration, and that an inspired man is a comforted man, because of his enlarged consciousness, and because of his growing nearness to the divine Spirit. And having received this comfort, do not suppose it is to be once for all. All life is discipline. We must watch every moment. The enemy never sleeps, never tires. When we lose our inspiration we lose our strength. We cannot live upon vanished benedictions. Let us beware of the world, the flesh, and the devil. It is said that the planet Venus has an advantage full of significance to the Christian heart, in that the earth never comes between her and the sun—as if the earth were a black enemy that would come if it could ; but the earth never intervenes, never breaks up the communication of light and warmth. The figure is full of suggestiveness. What is it that makes us so cold ? The earth has come between our souls and God. Why is it winter ? There is an interception somewhere that ought to be understood and accounted for, if not abolished. How is it that we have not the joy we once had ? Once we were like sons in God's house ; we could walk up and down with freedom ; we never wearied in prayer, we knew not the satiety of worship, our intercommunion with heaven was a growing delight : and now the Sabbath is too long, and the sanctuary too distant, and the exercises of the altar have become irksome. How is this ? The fault is not in God ; spare him when you are examining into the cause of the soul's winteriness and fruitlessness. The cause is in ourselves. Let the interception go, and the sun will fall upon us again, and make us glad with summer, rapturous with a feeling which can only be exceeded in quality and intensity and nobleness in heaven.



## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, we bless thee that thou hast spoken well of the days that are to come, for the days that are gone are full of weariness and sadness. We bless thee for gospel times, for millennial sunshine, for descending heaven. We thank thee for that word of thy Son, our Saviour, Hereafter shall ye see. Thou hast promised a great feast to the eyes of men; they are to behold new heavens, and a new earth in which dwelleth righteousness, and as for the ears of men they shall be filled with music. We thank thee that we have these prophecies in Christ Jesus, sealed by his name, glorified by his Amen, and made possible to us by the immediate peace which those who trust in him enjoy. Thou hast given us an earnest of the things that are to come; we do not live wholly in the future, but now what joy we have! Occasionally it is ecstasy, great passion of soul, infinite rapture of delight, so that we know not whether we are in the body or out of it, or in what heaven of thine, third or seventh, our souls are singing. Preserve us in the love of truth, and in the comfort of peace; and whilst we are filled with the spirit of anticipation may we be blessed with the grace of usefulness, so that even now we may turn our delight into service, our anticipation into sacrifice, and be found as faithful servants, honest stewards of God, each doing his duty faithfully, calmly, resolutely, independent of all fear or favour, giving himself wholly and lovingly to Christ. Comfort us in all our distresses, dry the tears which no hand but thine may touch, and when we have suffered awhile, and been perfected through suffering, bring us by right of the Cross, through the mystery of blood, to the land where there is no winter, where there is no night. Amen.

## Chapter xl. 3-9.

### PREPARATION FOR PROGRESS.

"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord" (ver. 3).

THAT voice is always crying. The note of all times that are progressive is a note of urgency, preparation, advance. The king is always coming; as to the form and method of his coming, who can tell? We had better refrain from speculation that must be useless, and cultivate the spirit of expectancy, hope, sacred joyous confidence. It was a very little wilderness that

was primarily meant by this reference, the wilderness between the Euphrates and Judah ; but the moral reference is to a wilderness infinite. But even that boundless desert can be traversed by light, quickest of all travellers, coming suddenly, flashing abroad in time that cannot be measured, so brief is it ; before we are well aware that it has come, it will have banished all the darkness, and the blue heaven will be shining above us cloudlessly, like a blessing. It is in this spirit we must do our work. Without this spirit we cannot work. The history of the world is full of dreariness, backwardness, enormous difficulty ; yet even that history has been making advances, almost imperceptible in their individuality ; but surely growing, extending, consolidating, until it would be impossible to roll back the history of the world. Sometimes there is nothing to instruct us but a "voice." We hear it, but cannot trace it. It is called the spirit of the times, the voice of the day, the genius of the hour. Sometimes it is personated in one man, one policy ; at other times, it is a diffused voice, coming, apparently to the ear, from all the points of the compass at once, but with singular unanimity, emphasis, truthfulness. It is never a voice of despair, or a tone that would cast the soul into dejection, but always like a clarion, or a chiming bell, or a father's call, or a soldier's resounding peal. Blessed are they who have ears to hear, and who respond to the call of the times with promptitude and diligence and loyalest love : only such shall be blessed with all heavenly treasure and rest.

There are many anonymous speakers in the Book of God. In fact, we cannot get rid of the anonymous element in the Bible : "A voice said unto me ;" "A voice shall be behind thee, saying ;" "An angel wrestled with me ;" "My Spirit shall go before thee ;" "A man clothed in white raiment"—a figure rather than a man in the ordinary sense of the term, an outline, an all but impalpable glowing vision, yet gleaming, approaching, receding, and wondrously acting upon the imagination, and all the while sounding a note of advance—Prepare ; make ready ; at such an hour as ye think not. Blessed is that servant who shall be found waiting, watching. We may judge of the reality (and need we shrink from saying, the divinity ?) of voices by the message which they deliver. When the voice says "Go back"

we may be sure it does not come from heaven. Heaven is a growing kingdom. When God's kingdom rests it is that it may come up again in larger, greener springs, in fuller and more glowing summers and autumns. When the preacher says, "You have done enough : there is nothing more to be learned," he has lost his ordination ; the unction from the Holy One, if it ever touched him, has evaporated or passed to some larger man. Hear a voice that says, "You know nothing yet in comparison with what has to be revealed ; what little light you have seen struggling on the horizon is as nothing compared to the great glory that shall flood the infinite heaven," when a voice so sounding, so charged, is heard, we may be sure that God has somewhat to do with its inspiration. Our law must be growth, development, progress, advance, every day, every year, so that we shall be always casting off our old selves, and passing forward into new identities—richer, more useful, manful.

What is to happen ? This is to occur—

"Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low ; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain" (ver. 4)

These may be regarded as geographical terms—"mountain," "hill," "valley,"—but the signification is moral. We are not to look for mere miracles in the levelling of mountains, and the filling-up of valleys, and the rectification of crooked lines ; all these are metaphorical terms, and the meaning is that the proud shall be brought low ; the meek shall be discovered and exalted ; the wrong shall be rectified, and the roughest men shall become as gentle lambs. How is it that we do not understand the signs of the times ? Why do we look for the bringing down of great mountains of a material kind, instead of looking for the downfall of proud spirits, the overthrow of bloated dominions, the rectification of moral inequalities, the establishment of noble, fearless justice ? What are the moral signs of the times ? Are there any hints that pride is being debased, and meekness is being exalted and crowned ? Not many to the vulgar eye ; things are contrary in many directions ; yet to those who can see the inner circle, and read between the lines of the big print of events, there is a wondrous dawning of new powers. The day of thrones and

princedom, and mighty monarchies and blustering despotisms, is westering, falling towards eventide, the day with them is far spent. There must be nothing of violence, bloodshed, revolution, madness; but even if these should occur, they can by a mighty ministry be wrought up into the proportion and music of things. Nor in this vaticination need there be one spark of unkindly or ungenerous feeling to any sceptre or crown the world over. History may die gently. There is no occasion to murder history. Let it sleep itself out, and let the new morning come without noise of chariot-rush, or plunge of eager steed. The Lord will bring in all his purpose, and we shall hardly know until it is realised; we shall look, and behold the heavens are renewed, and the old earth is rejuvenated, and man meets man with a new welcome, and there enters into the grip of friendship a tenderer assurance, and into the policy of statesmanship a nobler spirit, even the spirit of rectitude and honesty, equity and patriotism. Thus shall it be, and not otherwise; for the Lord's Christ is gentle; he will not break the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax, nor lift up his voice, nor cause it to be heard in the streets in violent crying; yet all the while he will inspire, enlarge, and glorify human progress, and men shall be almost unconscious of its advance until they are filled with its blessings.

"And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (ver. 5).

Here we want trumpets and organs, thundering voices, and all the great solemn winds that ever careered round the earth, yea, an ocean's mighty splash and roar, to express the glorious thought. Even here we shall have the co-operation of nature in the expression of thankfulness. What is it that makes all things musical but the miracle-working sun? For a time he is baffled in his best ministry by the cruel east wind; but he will presently melt it, or make it ashamed of its abortive attempts, and send it into some other quarter; and it shall come to us with penitential voice, and humiliation, and amendment, and restitution, from the south-west, and will pray to be taken into co-operation with the music-making sun. All things sing when the sun shines; even croaking suspends its fretfulness, old age looks round for its staff that it may toddle a yard or two under the genial rays;

childhood begins to sing and dance because the light fills its young heart, and all nature is joyous with a spirit of jubilee because the sun is in his happiest mood. These are symbolical, dim emblems, faint dawning hints of a grander reality. When men feel the "glory of the Lord" they cannot be silenced. True religious feelings must have musical expression. Sometimes the expression may be loud, incoherent, almost violent, so that men passing by shall say, "What are these mad men uttering?" There is a sane madness, a madness with method, a tempest of the soul in which dwells the spirit of sovereignty and peace. Again and again we have claimed that enthusiasm must return to the church, not by mechanical stipulation, but by an inspiration not of man, a mighty action of the Triune God. "All flesh shall see it together." The Old Testament is not a universal book in many lines; it is the Jews' book; it leads a certain people, cares for them, makes them rich with a thousand promises, and strong with inviolable and redundant securities; but now and again it flashes out into the greater humanity, the larger love; the redeeming yearning spirit, that would not that any should be in darkness whilst it has light to offer. We should, however, do the Bible injustice if we thought of its caring for any one people, for that one people exclusively; it is making for itself a point of origin, a point from which its action can proceed, with the larger completeness and with the higher force. Wherever God has cared for any one he has by implication cared for all men. Even God must begin somewhere. The Lord Christ began where he could. He accommodated himself to the moods and needs of the people; he himself might have begun at many a point not within the range of human imagination, but he was content to sit down with men, and to say to them, in effect, "Where can we begin? What wilt thou?" and when the thing was uttered, he said, "Believest thou that I am able to do this?" and when the answer was, "Yea, Lord," the word was hardly spoken before the miracle was completed. Here we have an escape from locality and limitation of every kind, and the prophecy culminates in a benefaction to "all flesh."

This is the Gospel in Isaiah; this is the evangelical dawn; this is the commission of evangelisation in its earliest utterances. We shall find other words which occur for the first time. It is



infinitely interesting to be present at the birth of words, or at their new uses, or inauguration for larger purposes. "All flesh:" the Jew is there and the Gentile, the bond and the free, the mighty man and his slave, old men and little children, young men and maidens,—“all flesh shall see it together;” it shall be a coming blessing, a universal donation, an impartial revelation of the divine glory. What is the divine glory but the divine holiness? We must not detach the attributes of God from his moral majesty. Who cares for omnipotence, except as a momentary wonder, something to be looked at, estimated, gazed upon with more or less of open-mouthed wonder? There is nothing in it, taken by itself, but fear, danger, a sense of overwhelming stress, and that is painful; and when we speak of the divine glory, what is it? If it be only so much light it would overpower human capacity, our receptivity would be distressed; we should say, “Lord, withhold the light, for our eyes are tormented with glory.” God’s power must be another term for God’s goodness, God’s glory another word for God’s holiness. All the terms must admit of moral transfer or translation; and this correlation of forces must be a passage from the abstract, the intolerable, the infinite in mere power and splendour, into moral temper, spirit, purpose; and then when we read of wisdom, holiness, mercy, compassion, and when at last a man arises to say it all in words of one syllable—“God is love”—it is noonday with civilisation, high noon with manhood, consummation below the heavens.

When the herald was charged to deliver another message it was in reality not another.

“The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever” (vers. 6-8).

That would be dismal were the meaning literal. The flesh that can see the glory of God, and appreciate the revelation, should not be blown upon and withered like grass. We must look for another and larger meaning. The flesh referred to here is a flesh of opposition, hostility, antipathy. It is true that all men wither and die in order that they may rise again into the larger life; it



was no platitude the proclaimer uttered when he said, "All flesh is grass," for history had been saying that from the very first day until then, and has been saying it every day since. The meaning, therefore, must be that the Lord liveth is the prime truth in all history. Whatever is said as to the frailty of man and the transitoriness of the glory of the world, is not said with reference to itself, but, contrastively, to set up in clearer light the supreme fact, which centralises and governs all providence, that God's throne is eternal. When the Lord said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but one jot or one tittle of the law shall not pass until all be fulfilled," he was not prophesying the passing away of the heaven and the earth; he was prophesying or declaring the permanency of the law; he was rather magnifying the truth that the heaven and the earth would not pass; and his words might be thus paraphrased: Sooner shall heaven and earth pass than one jot or tittle of the law shall fail of consummation. So when the mower goes forth in the morning with his infinite scythe, sharper than any whetted sword, and mows the nations down, it is to intimate that, succeed as he may, turn the whole earth into one grave if he can, the word of the Lord abideth; no scythe can cut that word in two, no sword can torture it, no enemy can arrest its development. So we are helped by mortality to understand immortality; we are helped by worldly transitoriness to see in contrast the intransitive, ever-abiding truth and love of God. Yet man lives, notwithstanding all this cutting down and withering of the grass. We have buried the ages, but we are here to weep over the grave in which they lie: and when we are buried other men will come to look upon the sod that rests upon our poor heart, and God's work will remain when all our mechanical arrangements have died through flux of time.

Now we come to the second word which is used for the first time.

"O Zion, that bringest good tidings" (ver. 9).

That is the first use of the term in this relation. This is Gospel — good-spell, God's spell, good news. The primary meaning of the Hebrew word is to *make smooth*; hence the balance of the sentences between the ninth verse and the fourth verse. All

things shall be smoothed, and from smooth the word passes easily to brighten, and from brighten to gladden, and to-day in the German it is *glatten*. So do we here and now, in verse 9, make our acquaintance with the sweet music-word Gospel, evangelisation. Is the evangelist born here? Is history dating itself with a new term from this juncture? O Zion, that bringest gospels, good news, get thee up into the high mountain—no mountain high enough—and let the world hear that the day of the Lord has come! “O Zion . . . O Jerusalem:” the appeal is the same; Zion, for the purposes of this appeal, is Jerusalem, Jerusalem is Zion. O Zion, O Jerusalem, to the mountain, and publish the jubilee of the world!

So would Christ have us do every day. The gospel was never given to be kept as a secret. Nowhere do we hear it said, If you have any bread, keep it to yourselves, no matter who is hungry. Nowhere is it said to the Christian Church, “You are in a time of reserve and self-consideration, and you must make your own souls guests at the Lord’s table, without regarding the innumerable vacancies at the banqueting board; eat and drink, O beloved, and do so abundantly, and care nothing for those for whom nothing is prepared.” That is not the voice of Christianity; that is not the purpose of the Gospel; that is not the mission of the Church. Is it possible that men can have good news and keep it to themselves? Here is a man face to face with a sufferer; he observes the sufferer’s emaciated condition, he notes his languid eye, his sunken cheeks, his bloodless lips, his gait of helplessness, his deepening infirmity, and all the time he knows precisely what would meet the case, and never speaks the secret. What is that man if the sufferer should die? He is a murderer! Can he in charity be called by any other name? He knew what would cure the man and never told him, and the man died. What does the Lord say? He says, His blood will I require at the traitor’s hand. “If thou forbear to deliver them that are drawn unto death, and those that are ready to be slain: if thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? and he that keepeth thy soul, doth not he know it? and shall not he render to every man according to his works?” These are the questions: what are the replies?

## Chapter xl. 28.

“Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding.”

### GOD'S POWER THE COMFORT OF HIS PEOPLE.

THESE words are addressed to the despondent, and at the first sound of them it would appear as if those who were cast down were spoken to in a voice of thunder. It would appear also as if a softer tone were better adapted to the condition of the persons referred to in the context, viz., those who were mourning God's absence, and sighing over the unwelcome lot which has come upon them. But this great interrogation seems as if the very thunder had taken in charge God's defence and man's elevation. “Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary?” Sometimes the voice of consolation seems to come to us out of the depths of God's heart; sometimes it is as if comfort were spoken to us in a whisper. Oftentimes God says he will not address us by the earthquake, and the stormy wind, and the rending fire, but he will come to us in an undertone, and find us out by the persuasive, gentle, penetrating pleading of his love; but here it is as if the Comforter stood above all created heights and thundered down from them upon the weary, and the desponding, and the faint-hearted. The terms by which God is described are not what may be termed the gracious designations which are often employed to describe him; it is not the Father, the Redeemer, the Gentle One; it is the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, as if divine comfort were not a sentiment only, as if divine comfort did not come only out of the divine emotions, but poured itself down upon us from all that is majestic, dominant, mighty, immeasurable, royal, and grand in the divine nature.

Then if he fainteth not, neither is weary, why should he rest? God rested, and set up in the midst of time a Sabbath day. How so? The word must not be interpreted to the disparagement or the great text that is now before us. There are two conditions on either of which man may rest, on one of which only does God retire from his work. The first condition is completeness, the second is weariness. God finished his work and rested. He rested because the work was finished; we rest because our poor little strength is wasted, and we sigh for the lengthening shadow, and need to be recruited by sleep. God finishes his work, and then he rests, not as one who is weary, but as one who has completed his design. We shall rest one day in that higher sense; in the meantime we have left our column unfinished, we have left our book incomplete, we have hurried away from our engagements, and they are waiting for our return; we rest because of an exhaustion of our strength, but he who is yonder in the heavens, throned above all heights, rests because his work is completeness—his efforts are perfection.

“Hast thou not known?”—this is not a new revelation. It is well to observe that, lest we find here an excuse for despondency, and a sufficient explanation of the plaintive and mournful tone to which life is often set. “Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard?”—it is an appeal to memory, and that is a strong point in all the divine pleading. We do not read here for the first time that God fainteth not, neither is weary. It is a mark of interrogation that is beautifully made a challenge of recollection. Our memory is to be as the prophet of the Lord in our life. Recollection is to be inspiration; the forty years gone are a pledge of the forty years to come. “Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard?” Let a man be faithful to his own recollections, and it is impossible he can long be despondent, weary, and slow of heart to lay hold of the great work and discipline of life. There is no heart that has not its own peculiar memories of the divine strength and of divine interposition, of divine interpretations of knotty questions in life, and of divine help in the hour of extremity, when sorrow was agony and when agony was despair. And it is the preacher’s strength that he has to speak directly into people’s hearts. He has not to argue some-

thing that is altogether outside of them, and that has no counterpart in their own life and spirit. He has to speak truths that are to be answered by the echoes of the heart, and every man is to say to him as he proceeds from point to point in his high argument and winning persuasion, "Master, thou hast said the truth." Let us gather ourselves around God's all-mightiness and God's all-knowingness, that we may be comforted, and stimulated, and enriched.

Is God all-mighty? Then do not fear for the stability of his works. We have no occasion to be afraid lest the sun should miss his way. What guarantee have we that the stars shall glitter in their places? Is it because we appoint our watchmen that they come to smile and shine upon us, pouring light into our dark hearts, and speaking hope into our despairing and gloomy souls? What guarantee have we that the seasons will continue? God's word. "Seed-time and harvest, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." What guarantee have we? We have little pieces of paper on which we write our I O U, and we have bonds and covenants, and our strong rooms, in which we secretly and silently lock up our pieces of precious paper. We say about any disputed covenant, It is in the bond, it is so nominated in the bond. The bond is all we have to rely upon. But we look for the continuance of these things, the keeping up of God's great temple, because God's word has been given, because God's sufficiency underlies, and encompasses, and gives stability to all his works. And in this view of the case it is very humiliating to meddlesome men—an exceedingly annoying thing—that there are parts of creation, parts of our own creation, out of which we are shut. How nice a thing it would be for some men of leisure, if they were called upon to improve the stars a little, and to call up the seasons one by one, and to say when it should rain, and when it should not rain, and when the east wind should blow, and when the south-west wind should pour its blessing on the rejoicing landscape! God does not want us there at all. He seems to be able to do quite without us there, and it is wonderful how small a cage it is within which the vastest mind is enclosed, and what very little pieces of work God asks any man to do in the creation that is around him. He can dig a little,

and plough a little, and he can throw in his seed ; but he has no power to tell the sun when to rise and when to set, and in what degree of heat to shine upon his little garden or his paltry field. But we work because God is. We have no fear of the stability of his works, and therefore we proceed from day to day in procuring our daily bread, and setting in operation all the forces that are needful for the cultivation alike of our bodily and mental life. This is very humbling in one of its aspects, because we have nothing whatever to do with all that is highest and grandest in creation. We are to do the servant's work. But do not some persons advertise that they object to menial employment ? Menial employment ! There is nothing but menial employment if we really knew it, and yet no employment is menial if it be accepted from God's hand, and wrought out according to the measure of his commandment and the inspiration of his call.

Is God all-mighty ? Then have no fear about the realisation of his promises. Oftentimes it is difficult to see how certain promises are to be realised. We have nothing to do with that whatever. God keeps our hands off his promises quite as surely as he keeps them off his stars, and if he will not let us intermeddle with his planets, and do our little scrubbing and burnishing upon those great lights, he will not ask us to have anything to do with the outworking and realisation of his promises. He asks that their fulfilment be left to him, and afterwards he will challenge our own life as the witness, and answer, and confirmation of all that is gracious and all that is sure in the outworking of his words of promise. You do not make so very much of it with all your bonds, and guarantees, and assurances, and oaths. If you live in the paper and parchment region altogether, you live a poor, shallow life. The greatest promises are moral promises, and it matters not how much paper a man may sign ; if his heart is wrong, he will swear away his own signature. If he has not signed with his heart, it is of poor account that he has signed with his hand. He can look at his signature and say it is his, and then work as if he had never written one single letter of it. It is God's heart that comes down with his signature. He has never dealt with us only by his hand. His hand has been the servant of his heart ; because of his moral attributes all that he



has promised shall be fulfilled to the letter. No, no, not fulfilled to the letter. What letter can hold God? The letter is only as the little river bank, the great waters of his love will overflow all the limitations of the most ambitious letter. God cannot be known by letters. They are but as the hem of his garment, they lie a long way from his heart.

Is God all-mighty? Then do not imagine you can escape his judgments. His lightnings find us out. His sharp spear penetrates our secrecy. You have evaded him now fifty years, and you think you can do so for many more. You cannot. Has the ox that has been driven into the fat pasture escaped the knife? Look at the noble animal. Look at the rich grass or clover, and see the sunshine falling upon the scene, and the ox says, "I am at rest, I have escaped the knife of the slayer," not knowing that the pasture is on the way to the slaughter-house, and that next to its death stands the rich blessing of its life. There are many oxen that are being prepared for the slaughter when they little think it.

Is God all-mighty? Then be assured that the throne of right shall stand upon the ruins of all wrong: but here God is apparently at a disadvantage, because you cannot kill evil with the sword. The abolition of evil is a work of time, requiring the combination, the conspiring of innumerable moral influences and educational forces: but that conspiring is going on. The Lord is not slack concerning his promises, as some men count slackness. The kings of the earth—those decorated playthings, when not true men and kings in heart as well as in hand—the kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his Anointed, saying—this is their bond—"Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us." That is one side of the picture. What is the answer? He that sitteth in the heavens sitteth without agitation, discomposure, or momentary apprehension: he that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh. What, laugh? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together; they get up their little plot, and they are going now to bring things their own way, and the great, quiet Sovereign of all shall—what?—shake

himself, call his thunder, take down his spear? No!—shall laugh! Laugh—and no man survives the laughter of God's derision! A terrible thing it is to be laughed at by God! Strike us, reason us down, send angels to bind us, and in these humiliations we shall find some little tribute to our greatness; but, O God! do not laugh at us. When God sets the universe laughing at a man, where can the man find rest? There is a poor outlook for those who are going to fight God!

God is not only powerful, he is also all-wise. There is no searching of his understanding. Infinite strength would terrify us, but infinite strength under the dominion of infinite mind recovers us from the tremendous shock which comes of abstract, immeasurable, unwasting strength. The forces of nature are not lawless. Storms are more than storms, as they appear to us. Behind them all is God's mind, God's controlling, directing intelligence. The lightning does not come out at its own bidding to smite the tree, and the tower, and the temple, and to blight the prospects of man. The lightning always comes and strikes, or passes on, at God's bidding, and under God's control. The east wind is not sent to us by some spiteful power that takes delight in withering up our strength; it comes because the Lord hath need of it in some sense or way.

Is God all-wise? Then the darkest providences have meaning. We will set ourselves as God's interpreters, and because we cannot make straight lines out of our crooked lot we think that God has turned our life into inextricable confusion. The darkest hours in our life have some intent, and it is really not needful that we should know all at once what that intent is. Let us keep within our own little sphere, and live a day at a time, and breathe a breath at a time, and be content with one pulsation at a time, and interpretation will come when God pleases, and as he pleases.

Is God all-wise? Then his plan of salvation is complete and final, and we shall waste our strength and show how great is our folly, by all attempts to improve the method of redemption and recovery of the world. What is there of God's we can improve? Find any little plant and improve it. Try it. You can surely

make something more out of a primrose than God has made. You could amend the buttercup and the daisy. Try it. Is there a blade of grass in all the meadows of the earth we can improve, looking at it as God constructed it, not as it has been withered and destroyed in any degree, but as God made it? Can you improve any one thing that God has made? Then why seek to improve the method of salvation which he has set up according to the revelation of his Holy Book, in the person and through the ministry of his Son? We will not even stop to argue whether this is God's Book or not; we will take the method of salvation as it is here declared, and rest the whole argument upon it. That will call us back from wandering into any collateral questions as to whether this is God's Book or not. Improve what is laid down here, that God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Improve it! We will not argue whether these words are what is called inspired or not; we will take them merely as words, take them as an idea, take them as if the poorest wretch in the world had spoken them, and I ask you to improve those words if you can. Love, divine love, divine love giving, divine love giving its only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth—not payeth, not worketh, not putteth out some external strength, but believeth—should not perish, but have everlasting life. It is a marvel that any heart can hear these words without saying instantly, "These words shall lie at the very root of my life; I will live upon them, and I will defy death in their strength."

Is God all-wise? Then our individual life is all understood by him. That life is but dimly known to ourselves. We catch glimpses of it here and there, but its scope and meaning are still unrevealed to us. We are often in shadow. There are scattered rays of light, but no steady shining of the sun which protects us from the mystery of much darkness. It is enough that God knows our life, and that his wisdom is pledged as our defence. Tomorrow is coming upon us, and we know not with what messages and revelations, with what joys and troubles; but God is coming with it, and in his path is the brightness of all-sufficient wisdom. We are quickened by the very mysteries of our life; view them

atheistically, and they become terrors and distresses before which the most daring courage quails; but regard them as under the control of beneficent power, and an eye of glory opens in the very centre of the gloom.

Is God all-wise? Then we have a guarantee of endless variety in our future studies and services. God is ever extending our knowledge of his works, in reward of the endeavours we are making to acquaint ourselves with the wonders by which we are enclosed. We have found nothing of mere repetition in his plans. Each star has its own glory, each flower has a bloom and a figure peculiarly its own; the very stones are known by distinctive impress. We have eternity before us—in itself a terrible consideration, only tolerable when thought of in connection with God's infinite wisdom: men grow weary when doomed to continuous pursuit of one object; monotony depresses and enfeebles the mind; to think, therefore, of having to live eternally is in itself a punishment, apart from the fact that no hour of the endless duration shall be unblest by the hallowed excitement occasioned by increasing intelligence and deepening love. God will ever have something new to communicate to the mind of his servants: secret after secret will be given up to their possession; realm after realm will be thrown open to their investigation; and when unnumbered ages have expired, the infinite riches of divine wisdom will be undiminished.

The subject raises the solemn enquiry—What is our relation to this Dread Being, whose power is infinite, and whose wisdom is past finding out? We must sustain some relation to him. We are the loyal subjects of his crown, or rebels in his empire. Pause, and determine the answer! Everything depends upon our relation to the Cross of Jesus Christ. Have we repented of sin—have we poured out our hearts in rivers of contrition—have we yielded our hearts in reply to the all-entreating and overwhelming argument of the Cross? You reverence God—that is not enough; you are lost in admiration of his marvellous power as shown in the courses of nature—that is not enough; you see proofs of his existence and government in every leaf of the forest—that is not enough; these things have no relation to sin, they

do not recover our lost sonship, they leave untouched the blackest and saddest facts of our life! Nature itself, brilliant and tuneful, is but a mocking mystery apart from the Cross—it is a lustrous grave, a prison under the name of a palace, a land of captivity and sorrow.

Souls are not saved by studying the works of nature. Astronomy and geology, botany and chemistry, have no redeeming message for hearts burdened with a sense of sin and guilt; we must go further and go deeper, a cry must be sent up to the dwelling-place of the Most High. O God, save us! O God, be merciful unto us! O God, redeem us from the slavery and torment of sin! And whilst we are yet speaking, a voice addresses the anxious heart—"Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." That is what we want! That is sweet as morning light to men who have long sat in great darkness, and precious as the voice of the Deliverer to bondsmen who have desired to die. And is there not a word of encouragement for those who are rejoicing in the forgiveness of sins? We are saved from fear. We have the freedom of the City of God. In moments of exhaustion we look unto the hills whence cometh our help—in times of embarrassment we take counsel with divine wisdom. Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. What time I am afraid, I will trust in God. The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? We are called unto trust. We are entitled to exult in the goodness and majesty of God. Ours is to be no depressing religion, but a religion of boundless joy. Our springs are not in ourselves: we hew no broken cisterns to ourselves; we undertake not our own affairs; we dwell in the security of God's power, and as for wisdom, we ask and receive. This message is to troubled men—to troubled hearts—to desponding souls; and how gracious is the reviving word! Let us arise from our hiding-places, and servê the Lord with renewed power; he waits to gather us into his infinite strength and to make us wise with perfect understanding.

## Chapter xl. 29.

"He giveth power to the faint."

### THE DIVINE HELPER.

**I**T were, perhaps, impossible to indicate any number of words into which more significance and sublimity are condensed. The entire sentence is vital with meaning. We know not whether more to admire the power which they reveal, or praise the sympathy which they express. Let us analyse the language: "He giveth;" how suggestive of opulence—how indicative of benevolence! The terms are applicable to God in all relations to every grade of intelligent being: there is no moment in the history of life, in all regions, in which God ceases from giving; he is the one Giver: "Every good gift, and every perfect gift, cometh down from the Father of lights." In proportion, therefore, as man gives, does he become God-like; it is impossible for the finite more closely to approach the infinite than in the act of imparting blessing. "He giveth power;" how suggestive of might! Giving does not diminish his strength; he is as powerful now as when he projected the worlds into the fields of space; he is as able now to take up the isles as a very little thing as when Isaiah sung the wonders of his arm. "He giveth power"—this is the language of the sunbeam, as it pierces the intercepting cloud and gladdens the earth with its smile—this is the language of the flower, as it opens its mild eye in the morning of spring, this is the language of the moral Lazaruses, as they rise from their tombs and lay aside their cerements, and this is the language of the angelic hosts, as they spread their pinions to pursue their appointed mission! In short, this is the language of the universe; we can touch no atom which is destitute of the inscription, "He giveth power." "He giveth power to the faint;"—who cares for the faint? If a man cannot succeed in business, he is often left



to perish without a tear of sympathy or an offer of aid. So long as men can support themselves they may find supporters, but when they faint by the way, few are sympathetic enough to bend in brotherly kindness and help in their restoration! God, however, whose thoughts and ways infinitely transcend the thoughts and ways of man, stoops in paternal benevolence to revive the weary and invigorate the faint. Thus is every word pregnant with meaning, and the bare enunciation of the language should awake the thankfulness of every spirit!

Our spiritual condition is intimately known to the divine Father. He knows the strong and the faint alike. As a wise Shepherd he is acquainted with the state of his entire flock. Some he leads with gentleness, and others are carried in his bosom. It is, indeed, in no wise strange that man should be morally faint, if we consider his nature, and the agencies by which it is influenced.

(1) There is our inherent antagonism to evangelical truth. Man is prone to self-leaning. Every hour witnesses to the difficulty of renouncing self, and casting the soul with strong confidence on the finished work of the only Saviour. Man will ever and anon deport himself as though by his own might he could remove mountains and encounter embattled hosts, and God permits him to try his skill, and returns not until the cry is heard, "Lord, save me, or I perish." We are strong in proportion to our trust. As we are enabled to look beyond ourselves we can reiterate the apostolic paradox, "when I am weak then am I strong." When we leave the Cross we faint—while we glory in its Sufferer we are armed with irresistible might!

(2) There is the seductive influence of worldly association. Could we evermore remain on the mount of transfiguration, we might be strong, rejoicing in the Lord; but as we descend from its holy and resplendent heights, and re-unite ourselves with the world, our fervour becomes chilled and our strength paralysed. Individual experience confirms these assertions. There have been blissful periods in which our souls have been thrilled with delight, in which our exultation has been second only to the raptures of heaven. Descent is less difficult than ascent;

while it requires the might of God to secure our elevation, the breath of man may be effectual to our downfall ! We have often entered the world with a determination to resist its charms and avoid its snares, but in an evil hour have relaxed our moral grasp on the Great Helper, and have thus been wearied and prostrated by the stormy and enervating influence of the world.

(3) There is the fierce battle for daily bread. In these times of fierce competition it is sometimes difficult for virtue to cope with the ingenuity of vice. Vice respects no boundaries, and laughs scornfully at the true standard and the just weight. No device is too mean for unprincipled men. Intellect is bribed to invest rottenness with charms, and conscience is lulled to sleep that she may cease from hurling the thunderbolt or taking up a lamentation for the mournful fate of rectitude. I sympathise most tenderly with the Christian merchant who is exposed to the subtle and powerful temptation to meet men on their own ground, and smite them with their own weapons. Let me entreat you, however, to abide by truth and purity, remembering the gracious assurance, "No good thing will God withhold from them that walk uprightly."

(4) There is our ever-recurring unbelief. The spirit of ancient Israel unhappily still prevails. Though we have beheld a succession of wonders displayed on our behalf—though morning and night have alike been eloquent with the praise of God, yet we have no sooner been delivered out of one difficulty than we have dreaded another ! Instead of reasoning from the lion and the bear to the uncircumcised Philistine, we have forgotten our deliverances, and mourned as though Omnipotence had never bared its arm in our defence ! We have forgotten the seven loaves and the twelve baskets of fragments, and have hung our heads as though we had never used a sickle or enjoyed a feast ! "How is it that ye have no faith ?" is the oft-repeated inquiry which God institutes in his own family. As faith fails, man faints—and on the ground which he should have occupied as a conqueror, he lies panting as a victim.

Seeing that such is our nature, and such are the influences which affect it, we are called upon to rejoice that God treats us

as men. "He knoweth our frame, he remembereth that we are dust." Did his expectations exceed our capabilities, the love of the Father would be lost in the rigour of the tyrant. He knoweth every blast which we encounter, and not a foe can find an ambush whose secrecy evades the vigilance of his love. God will not suffer his people to be tried above that they are able to bear—he will not allow faintness to be followed by death, for "he giveth power to the faint."

Moral faintness does not invalidate Christian character. Were all the "faint" to be excluded, how many of you would remain as children of God? Does the parent cast off the crippled child? Does the parent make physical weakness the reason for disinheritance? In one loud No you answer. Neither does God neglect or despise the weakest believer who confides in his Son. Let us guard this assurance with two explanations:—

(1) It contains no encouragement to moral indolence. You are not to exonerate yourselves from the stern duties of life, on the plea that you are "faint." Imagine not that as moral invalids you are entitled to a life of ease; your business is to "renew your strength," by waiting upon God. Indolence will increase your weakness. The toiler grows strong. Exercise develops muscle. In proportion as you labour will the power of labouring augment. You are to resemble Gideon and his three hundred true-hearted allies, who, in searching for the kings of Midian, are described as "faint, yet pursuing;" and though the princes of Succoth refused them bread, they ceased not until Zebah and Zalmunna fell beneath their sword. Do you affirm, then, that you are "faint"? I reply, you may still be "pursuing," and though not with the rapidity of the robust, yet with all the strength which a willing mind can command.

(2) It affords no palliation for inconsistency. We are never allowed to plead weakness as a reason for sin. Because Gideon's soldiers were "faint" they did not turn their swords upon each other, or prove treacherous to the mission which they had undertaken. They might have pleaded their faintness as a reason for returning home, but with soldier-like courage they pursued the

difficult way, until their weary heads were honoured with the crown of victory. Let not their example be lost upon us: though weak, let our faces be Zion-ward, and though many may outstrip us in the race, let us be found laying aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, "looking unto Jesus" for the smile which can cheer the most rugged path, and the strength which can vanquish the most potent foe!

In God's great family there are diversities of moral development. There are alike the babe of days and the sire crowned with grey hairs—the tremulous spirit easily deterred, and the valorous heart that exults in the prospect of difficulty. There is, however, but one Father, and his tender mercies are over all. "One star differeth from another star in glory," but all stars bear the impress of a common origin. So in the moral world—the triumphant apostle who asks death to show his sting, and the trembling publican that dare ask for nothing but mercy, are alike the offspring and choice of Infinite Power and Unsearchable Wisdom. The question, therefore, relates not to the degree of power with which you may be blessed, but to your moral position: Are you in the family? I ask not whether a hemisphere may be radiant with your splendour, or whether yours is a struggling and fitful ray, but I ask, Are you in the firmament? There is no honour so lofty, no privilege so sweet, as that of being a moral child, even though so weak as to be carried in the Saviour's arms.

Infinite power is accessible to the morally feeble. "He giveth power to the faint."

(1) God never communicates surplus power. "Thy shoes shall be iron and brass, and as thy day so shall thy strength be." God promises no strength beyond the day in which it is required.

(2) God's method of communicating power teaches the dependence of humanity. God gives power as daily bread is given. Not a single energy is ever displayed by your body or mind that is not bestowed or sustained by the Supreme. Our duty, then, is to remember that in ourselves we are helplessly weak, but that in Christ we are armed with power irresistible. Hence,

saith the apostle, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me;"—even Paul's was a derived power. God's alone is original; but it is enough for man if he can shine with radiance borrowed from the Fount of uncreated light.

(3) God's willingness to communicate power greatly increases the responsibility of the Church. What power we might have! "Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." It is not enough to satisfy the severity of reason that men should merely walk according to the light they have, they are bound to walk according to the light which they might have. The same remark applies to moral power; Infinite might is placed at our disposal—God says, "Ask, and it shall be given," so that if we faint, we faint in despite of the divine offer—if we perish with hunger, it is in the presence of a table spread with the viands of heaven.

Let me call you to the Rock as your standing place. "The conies are a feeble folk, but they make their houses in the rock." God's invitation to you is to make your dwelling in the Rock of Ages—in order to assist you he has caused that Rock to be cleft on your behalf, and all who find a refuge there are preserved alike from the heat of the sun, the fury of the wind, and the rage of the swelling billow.

Though we might pause here, and thank God for the goodness which he has manifested to the Church, the festival is by no means exhausted: there are truths yet to be elicited from this text which will be as meat and drink to those who are hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Let us consider the declaration in the following aspects:—

(1) As the sublimest encouragement to the Church. "He giveth power to the faint." Who is this Being represented in the pronoun? Who will supply the substantive? Isaiah himself shall answer: "It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out

as a tent to dwell in." This All-glorious Being deigns to comfort the Church with assurances of aid : " Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over from my God ? Hast thou not known ? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary ? there is no searching of his understanding." Did ever pronoun represent a substantive equal to the majesty and excellence here implied ?

(2) As the tenderest assurance to the penitent. " The bruised reed he will not break, the smoking flax he will not quench." Can you crawl, as it were, to the throne of the heavenly grace ? He will give you power ! The Infinite will receive the weak and the powerless with compassion, and those who struggle feebly to his feet will be so strengthened as to walk and leap and praise the Lord ! " He shall feed his flock like a shepherd : he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young." Are any fearing that God will spurn their approach ? They need fear no longer ! " He giveth power to the faint." Your meekness will excite his pity, and will be turned into might by the impartation of his energy. " Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me ; for I am meek and lowly in heart : and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

(3) As the highest tribute to the work of Christ. Had there been no Saviour, there could have been no " faint " ones. Even faintness implies life ; but whence came this life ? Men, by nature, are dead in trespasses and sin—earth is a vast cemetery. Who has blown the trumpet of resurrection ? Christ has visited the cemetery, and wept amid its terrible desolation ; and, as he gazed on the ruins of a noble race, he said, " I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." Then is Christ man's life-giver ! The weakest child in the great family is a tribute to the mighty energy and unparalleled tenderness of Christ. He disarms the tyrant, and leads all who believe in him to the region of happiest freedom !



(4) As a glorious pledge of God's interest in humanity. He did not turn from the sinner as from a mass of loathsome corruption, and betake himself to recesses where the voice of the moral leper could not be heard. But when iniquity abounded, love much more abounded—true, the race was smitten with foulest leprosy, blasphemy was thunder-tongued, and vice was rampant, yet the divine Spirit was moved with pity, and divine compassion was embodied in sacrifice. There is peculiar solemnity in the reflection that God is interested in man—this thought invests every individual with singular dignity, and charges human life with most oppressive responsibilities. To the believer, in particular, is the thought affecting and blissful: he is compassed about with a great cloud of witnesses—his steps are ordered by the Lord—his very hairs are numbered—and his song is, “though I fall I shall not be utterly cast down, for God giveth power to the faint.” We cannot realise God's marvellous condescension, in helping the helpless, without being deeply affected by the conviction that he is intensely interested in all that appertains to the purity, freedom, and happiness of the human race.

(5) As a presumptive proof of man's immortality. But how so? What of immortality breathes here? Can they who faint be immortal? Observe that I claim to find merely a presumptive proof of our endless duration, and am persuaded that you will justify my reasoning when acquainted with the basis on which it rests. Why all this feeding like a shepherd? Why this gentle tending—this inspiration of life—this sustaining of vigour—this communication of power? Is the mysterious process undertaken when God has determined that all shall end in dust? Does the divine Being sustain merely that earthly life shall be prolonged? Reason revolts at the supposition. With reverence we declare our conviction that such a process, terminating in such an issue, is utterly unworthy the power, the wisdom, the tenderness of the everlasting God. Why should Jehovah stoop to impart power to the faint, when he knows that in a few brief years the faint one will have crumbled to dust? Assuming man's mere mortality, you argue that the education, the discipline, the capacities with which God has endowed the race, are all to be conquered and destroyed by death! Be it ours, to feel in

every reviving breeze breathed over our fainting spirits a pledge of life that shall survive death—a life coeval with the duration of Godhead. “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.” “What advantageth it us, if the dead rise not? let us eat and drink; for to-morrow we die.” While, therefore, impressed with the solemn conviction of our immortality, I charge you to institute an immediate and exhaustive examination into the grounds on which you rest your hopes of happiness in the march of endless ages!

In addition to the great principles which we have thus enunciated, we might supply almost interminable illustration of the text from the records of individual life. See Elijah, for example, hidden in the cave and desiring to die; he is faint well nigh unto death, yet the “still small voice” revives his drooping energies, and as he passes from the hiding-place of his weariness and sorrow, he practically repeats the text—“He giveth power to the faint.” Behold Jonah also; as the sun is beating on his head he faints and wishes in himself to die, saying it is better for me to die than to live, but he is re-inspired by the Power which will not break the bruised reed. Turn to the history of David, and illustration without end will be furnished; in all the storms of his eventful life he tested the life-sustaining grace of God: so truly is this evident, that in his most mournful strains there are notes of hope which he could learn nowhere but at the gate of heaven. Hear the joyous melody which gushed from his grateful and mighty spirit: “Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident . . . in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion: in the secret of his tabernacle shall he hide me; he shall set me upon a rock . . . I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord:” as though he had overheard Isaiah assuring despondent Israel that “they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.” But why should we cull illustrations from the ancient records? It is not necessary

that we should escape from modern days and appeal to the library of Judaism for historic proofs that God giveth power to the faint. We are living witnesses of the glorious fact. We can say with all the gratitude of the apostle, "though the outward man perisheth, the inward man is renewed day by day." Faint and weary we have been met by the sympathetic Saviour, and have received of his fulness grace upon grace! We rejoice, indeed, that the song which celebrates renewing power was awakened in the morning of the world, and we would prolong its swelling strains until the mantle of night shall assert the termination of earthly scenes. One generation has cried after another, "Thy tender mercies have been ever of old;" and the testimony shall increase in force until all nations shall call the Restorer blessed! Our hearts burn within us as we muse on the loving-kindness which stoops to revive the faint. Are any travel-worn and cast down by reason of the difficulties of the way? whose mournful language is, "Oh, that it were with us as in times gone, when we ran with footmen and horsemen, and so outstripped them that we even longed for a contest with the swellings of Jordan; but now is our strength failed and our bones are melted"? Then, O dejected ones, in the language of the prophet, "Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over from my God? Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary?" You are waiting at the broken cistern of your own righteousness for a supply of power, instead of turning to the Omnipotent and pleading his promises of aid. Rise, and return to the God of Jacob, for if he has smitten he will heal, and if he has torn he will bind up!

## Chapter xli.

1. Keep silence before me, O islands [a word which always signifies far-off lands, sea-coasts distant as the horizon]; and let the people renew their strength [pull themselves together, gird up their loins, that they may wrestle with almightiness]: let them come near; then let them speak: let us come near together to judgment [let us wrestle together, let us enter into this controversy: the tone is that of a challenge, a contemptuous defiance].

2. Who raised up the righteous man from the east [who hath raised up from the east the man whom righteousness calls to tread in his steps?], called him to his foot, gave the nations before him, and made him rule over kings? [Is the reference to Abraham the pilgrim, or to Cyrus the conqueror? The question is, Who raised up this righteous man?] he [God] gave them as the dust to his sword, and as driven stubble to his bow [hardly was their blood shed or stained upon the ground than they were trampled under foot: it was a humiliating death].

3. He pursued them, and passed safely; even by the way that he had not gone with his feet. [A new way, a path found in pathlessness].

4. Who hath wrought and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? [Let us look to facts, to experience, to proofs that cannot be gainsaid: the appeal of God is always to history. Having asked the question, he answers it] I the Lord, the first, and with the last; I am he.

5. The isles [distant undiscovered places] saw it, and feared [felt a singular action at the heart, vibrated, wondered, and almost prayed]; the ends of the earth were afraid [felt a sense of ghostliness, immeasurableness; was sure there was a spectral presence in the air], drew near, and came [fell into committee, constituted a council of paganism].

6. They helped every one his neighbour [they said, We must join together in this matter, for no single man can fight the spirits of the air]; and every one said to his brother, Be of good courage [they thought that a multiplication of cowardice would add up to courage; they cheered one another; every man thought his brother was courageous, and every brother was timid with pitiable timidity].

7. So the carpenter [rather, the founder; the idols were metallic, not wooden] encouraged the goldsmith [put something in his way, kept his trade going], and he that smootheth with the hammer him that smote the anvil [they must keep their bellows blowing, and their fire alight], saying, It is ready for the soldering: and he fastened it with nails [the supreme irony! he fastened the little god with nails], that it should not be moved [and secured him against the wall].

8. But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend. [Will that word ever be applied to Christian believers? Is it an incommunicable honour?]

9. Thou whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called thee from the chief men thereof, and said unto thee, Thou art my servant; I have chosen thee, and not cast thee away. [I turned thee from a villager into a cosmopolitan; I brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, and made thee a light flooding the world with splendour: I enlarge men, I ennoble human functions; out of the mustard seed I bring a great tree.]

10. ¶ Fear thou not; for I am with thee [a sentiment based upon reason]: be not dismayed; for I am thy God [a flower growing upon a rock]: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness. [The rhetoric of God—"I will, I will, I will:" the redundancy of almightiness; there shall be strength enough, and all that is left over shall be more than what was given.]

11. Behold, all they that were incensed against thee shall be ashamed and confounded [ashamed of their own fuming and vapouring and impotent anger]: they shall be as nothing [it is well when rhetoric fails to catch a figure; it is better that some rhetoric should thus fall down in pitiable humiliation, for there is no simile or personification or imaginable figure that can set forth the confusion of those whom God confounds]; and they that strive with thee shall perish [wither at the top, wither at the root, wither all through, and disappear completely].

12. Thou shalt seek them, and shalt not find them, even them that contendeth with thee [not an inch of their steel shall be left behind; not a footprint can be found by concentrated light; wert thou to focalise the sun upon their standards, tip of toe or stump of heel thou couldst not find]: they that war against thee shall be as nothing, and as a thing of nought.

13. For I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee. [The encouragement is never given without the reason.]

14. Fear not, thou worm Jacob, and ye men of Israel [the beginning was small; God started with dust; and so far he has made intelligent responsible men—men who can curse and pray; go to hell, or rise to heaven: what a miracle in dust!]; I will help thee, saith the Lord, and thy redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.

15. Behold, I will make thee a new sharp threshing instrument having teeth [thou shalt beat whatever comes in thy way to small dust, or disentangle it; it shall be wholly in thy power]: thou shalt thresh the mountains, and beat them small, and shalt make the hills as chaff. [Thou shalt almost touch the mystery of omnipotence: but, observe, it is "I will make thee"—I will do it: even the threshing instrument is only in the hands of an instrument: the Lord reigneth.]

16. Thou shalt fan them, and the wind shall carry them away, and the whirlwind shall scatter them: and thou shalt rejoice in the Lord, and shalt glory in the Holy One of Israel. [Triumph shall lead to worship; along the high road of victory men shall walk to the altar; there shall be no vapouring and self-boasting, but a great magnifying of God.]

17. When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I the Lord will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them. [I will make the cisterns and the rocks fountains, and there shall be streams above all known water-levels, and all the streamlets and rills shall flow down into the valleys, and make them green with spring and summer].

18. I will open rivers in high places, and fountains in the midst of the valleys: I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. [What a speech, viewed from the point of human weakness! But nothing can be beyond the altitude of omnipotence.]

19. I will plant in the wilderness [anybody can plant in a garden] the cedar, the shittah tree, and the myrtle, and the oil tree; I will set in the desert [where nobody ever expected anything to grow] the fir tree, and the pine, and the box tree together:

20. That they may see, and know, and consider, and understand [if providence ever can be made into a theological argument] together, that the hand of the Lord hath done this, and the Holy One of Israel hath created it.

21. Produce your cause, saith the Lord [let us have both sides of the argument]; bring forth your strong reasons, saith the King of Jacob [be at your best, in your highest form, in your most eloquent frame of mind, and let the foremost speaker amongst you state the case].

22. Let them bring them forth, and show us what shall happen [not what shall happen ten centuries hence, but what shall happen in the near future—say, the day after to-morrow: I will not tax them that they may overlook all the lapse of ages, I will set before them a child's task, if they be prophets at all: what shall happen the next thing but one, is the literal meaning]: let them shew the former things [not the things that happened yesterday, but the things that will happen just before the things that are going to happen], what they be, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or declare us things for to come.

23. Shew the things that are to come hereafter [that is, almost immediately], that we may know that ye are gods: yea, do good, or do evil, that we may be dismayed, and behold it together [prove yourselves].

24. Behold, ye are of nothing, and your work of nought: an abomination is he that chooseth you [the greater fool of the two].

25. I have raised up one from the north, and he shall come: from the rising of the sun shall he call upon my name: and he shall come upon princes as upon mortar, and as the potter treadeth clay [he shall not shed their blood, but shall tread them out of existence; they shall be crushed, not slaughtered, with sharp instruments,—the potter treading clay is the image of this man of woe who shall crush his foe].

26. Who hath declared from the beginning, that we may know? and beforetime, that we may say, He is righteous? yea, there is none that sheweth, yea, there is none that declareth, yea, there is none that heareth your words. [If there be, produce him; prove the case: the appeal must always be to history, to fact, to reality, to known experience.]



27. The first shall say to Zion, Behold, behold them: and I will give to Jerusalem one that bringeth good tidings.

28. For beheld, and there was no man [that could argue the case with me, no man that could prove that history had ever grown one man who was almighty]; even among them, and there was no counsellor, that, when I asked of them, could answer a word. [They were all dumb; they could boast when they were by themselves; a great meeting of pagans could applaud one another, but when the divine question was asked they were silent.]

29. Behold, they are all vanity [a veering wind, dying whilst it blows]; their works are nothing [again and again the word of humiliation recurs]: their molten images are wind and confusion [impalpable, imponderable, noisy, self-confounding, and ending in mortification and disappointment]

### NOTE.

"THIS SECTION (xl.-xlviii.) has for its main topic the comforting assurance of the deliverance from Babylon by Koresh (Cyrus), who is even named twice (xli. 2, 3, 25, xlv. 28, xlv. 1-4, 13, xlv. 11, xlviii. 14, 15). This section abounds with arguments against idolatry, founded mainly (not wholly, see the noble passage xlv. 9-20) upon the gift of prediction possessed by Jehovah's prophets, especially as shown by their predicting Cyrus, and even naming him (xli. 26, xlv. 8, 24-26, xlv. 4, 19, 21, xlv. 8-11, xlviii. 3-8, 15). Idols and heathen diviners are taunted with not being able to predict (xli. 1-7, 21-24, xlviii. 8-13, xlv. 20, 21, xlvii. 10-13). This power of foretelling the future, as shown in this instance, is insisted upon as the test of divinity. It is of importance to observe, in reference to the prophet's standing-point in this second part, that in speaking both of the captivity in Babylon and of the deliverance out of it, there is (excepting Cyrus' name) no specification of particular circumstances, such as we might expect to find if the writer had written at the end of the exile; the delineation is of a general kind, borrowed frequently from the history of Moses and Joshua. Let it be observed, in particular, that the language respecting the *wilderness* (e.g. xli. 17-20), through which the redeemed were to pass, is unmistakably ideal and symbolical.

"It is characteristic of sacred prophecy in general, that the 'vision' of a great deliverance leads the seer to glance at the great deliverance to come through Jesus Christ. This association of ideas is found in several passages in the first part of Isaiah, in which the destruction of the Assyrian army suggests the thought of Christ (e.g. x. 24-xi. 16, xxxi. 8-xxxii. 2). This principle of association prevails in the second part taken as a whole; but in the first section, taken apart, it appears as yet imperfectly. However, xlii. 1-7 is a clear prediction of the Messiah, and that too as viewed in part in contrast with Cyrus; for the 'servant' of Jehovah is meek and gentle (vers. 2, 3), and will establish the true religion in the earth (ver. 4). Nevertheless, since the prophet regards the two deliverances as referable to the same type of thought (comp. lxi. 1-3), so the announcement of one (xl. 3-5) is held by all the four Evangelists, and by John Baptist himself, as predictive of the announcement of the other."—SMITH'S *Dictionary of the Bible*.

## Chapter xlii. 1-4.

"My servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighted; I have put my spirit upon him" (ver. 1).

### THE QUALIFIED ONE.

HERE is a man with a great qualification. Can we add to these qualifications? Is there any omission of power, honour, supreme spiritual quality? Is this man equally strong at every point? Or is he like ourselves characterised by some strong points and humiliated by some points of weakness? Is he strong throughout? And is it mere strength, which people may admire, but cannot love? Or is it a condescending strength? Is it marked by tenderness and sympathy, by pity and by love? The qualification is certainly large—"my servant;" some say, "my son"—yet a servant. Jesus Christ thought it not robbery to be equal with God, yet he made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant. He is described as the servant of God, and of men. He himself said, "He that is greatest among you shall be your servant." He is not a man of clear and weighty judgment who sees nothing of honour even in the word "servant." Ill times have befallen us if we attach to that word nothing but the idea of humiliation, lowness, valuelessness. That word must be restored to its right place in human intercourse. If any man proudly rise and say he is not servant, there is a retort, not of human invention, which might overwhelm any who are not swallowed up of self-conceit and self-idolatry. We do not know what it is to rule until we know what it is to serve. Let no one, therefore, be affrighted from this text as from a Messianic prophecy because the word "servant" finds a place here where the word "son" would seem to be more in harmony with the descent, the prerogative, and the majesty of Christ. And supper being ended, he rose, and girded himself with a towel, and washed the disciples' feet, and said, Do the same with one

another. Thus did he dignify service ; thus did he prepare the servant for becoming the friend : henceforth I call you not "servants," but "friends." Yet the higher title could not have been conferred had not the lower ministry been fulfilled with faithfulness. That is the point to be observed. "He that is faithful in few things, shall be made ruler over many things." "Well done, good and faithful servant ; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." Thus we must go, and by no fancy way of our own, escaping humiliation, and toil, and difficulty, and self-immolation, and tremendous danger, but passing through the whole process patiently, lovingly, loyally, and with the eternal hopefulness which belongs to trust and rectitude. Even if the words in their first signification apply to Cyrus or to some other historical character, they find their fullest realisation in the Son of God. There is no reason why intermediate meanings should be withheld ; let them be broadly acknowledged, and let all human rewards be assigned that they may be enjoyed by those who are entitled to them ; but all these recognitions of passing merit, of transient greatness, need not prevent our fixing our eyes upon him in whom all prophecy culminates, and by whom all prophecy is glorified.

"Whom I uphold,"—others say, "on whom I lean ;" such contradictions may we find without any real contrariety of meaning. The sayings of Jesus Christ are full of such contradiction ; but we live progressively until we are able ourselves to reconcile them, and say with exulting thankfulness, Now we know what the Lord meant when he said such and such words. Once he said, "I and my Father are one," and once he said "My Father is greater than I : " the grammar puzzled us, we thought we had discovered a discrepancy ; but we see how both statements may be true. God may uphold his servant, and God may lean upon his servant ; thus accommodating himself to the uses of the narrowest human language. "Mine elect,"—my own choice, the very man I want ; not a man who has come by chance, or through a series of uncalculated events, but one who bears the stamp of eternity ; the companion of my soul in ages which lie beyond all human reckoning. "In whom my soul delighteth." In what does the soul of the musician delight ? In harmony, in perfectness of co-operation and action, in sweet rhythms. In what does

the soul of the artist rejoice ? In proportion, in colour, in significance, in infinite suggestions that are not patent to the common gaze. In what does the soul of the teacher delight ? In intellectual progress, in mental virility, in the outleading of the mind, in the expansion of mental capacity ; not so much in the storing of information as in the quickening of the mind, a quickening amounting to a species of inspiration, certainly to a definite hunger and thirst for the larger truth—nay, for wisdom herself in all her completeness and beauty. By these analogies we may come to some apprehension of what is meant by the soul of God delighting in his servant, because the servant fulfils all God's purpose, is equal to the whole human occasion, is qualified with every instrument, faculty, power needful for the execution of a beneficent design. "I have put my spirit upon him : " I have crowned him ; if he be represented by a pillar, square, massive, lofty, faultless in perpendicular, he is crowned with the spirit ;—or, I have put my spirit within him ; so that within and without he is fully furnished ; he says nothing of his own invention—"The words that I have heard speak I unto you." Said Christ in effect—I have lain upon the bosom of the Father and heard the beating of his heart ; I have understood the meaning of his breathing ; I have come to reveal him, to tell you what he told me, to make known unto you the very thought and purpose of God.

But for what end was this qualification originated and established ? The answer is in the first verse :—"He shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles." It was a moral purpose ; things were to be rectified. It was not that he might sing a new poetry, fascinate the ear of the world with new strains of music, take his seat among the learned and the wise, and propound to them riddles and problems which would perplex them. Christ's coming was distinctive in its purpose and limit. It was a moral issue. He came to set the foundations of things right, in straight courses. He might have come upon a more dazzling mission as viewed from a strictly worldly point. He came to deal with the heart of the world, with the judgment of men, with the inner life, with the very soul of society. Nor was this morality limited in its range by any ethnic lines or purely geographical boundaries. Jesus

Christ came to shed light upon the whole earth. Jew and Gentile were terms that were to be abolished in all their narrowest significance, and the term Man was to be established as descriptive of the human race. All accidental separations and differences and collisions were to be done away, and all men, in all time, in all the world, were to recognise that they had a common father in God.

But this qualification, though great, is not the whole qualification which is assigned to the Servant and Son of God. He was not only great in positive power, he was equally great in restraint, in self-control. There is a negative qualification, as well as a qualification that is distinctively positive; and Jesus Christ combined both qualifications. Let us read what he shall not do:—

“He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street” (ver. 2).

He is not a debater; he does not belong to the society of men who walk up and down in the open square, called the “street,” or *agora*, or the market-place, saying, Who will talk with me to-day? What shall we debate? My sword is ready, who will fence? He does not belong to the word gladiator; from that school he abstains. There were men who delighted in controversy in the open squares of the city. Such controversy took the place of modern literature, morning journals, and the means of publicity of every kind, open to modern society. Jesus Christ spoke whisperingly to hearts. Men had to incline their ear to hear him. He was no blatant controversialist, making rude noises in the air, but a speaker of music that could only be heard in all its plaintiveness, in all its minor tone of sweetest love, by the listening heart. No public wrestler or gladiator was the Son of God. He did not exclaim, nor lift up, nor make an uproar in the public places of the city. This gives to his occasional exclamation great emphasis and clearness. Who could speak like Jesus Christ, when it suited the occasion that he should make his voice heard? “In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink.” Then his voice was heard afar off. Men who had heard human voices all their lifetime turned to see the speaker who

uttered himself in tones so lofty and gracious. The characteristic, however, of the Gospel is that it approaches men ; so to say, surrounds them, fascinates them, draws upon itself their attention and their confidence by a wondrous power of quietness : it comes not with blare of trumpet or with throb of drum, but as a still small voice, a speaker that would speak to you alone and hold the heart in sweet intercourse when no third party is present ; it was the way of the Cross.

“A bruised reed shall he not break” (ver. 3).

Mere power would have broken it. Where there is great self-control there is, however, more than mere strength ; it is calculated power, it is adapted energy, it is regulated force ; there is nothing rude, violent, overwhelming about it ; when it descends it comes with the quietness of light—that imponderable, wondrous beam that comes down to fight the night, and smites it with a silent stroke, so that the night is no more seen ; all heaven rejoices in gracious brilliance. Political economy breaks bruised reeds. Science of a certain kind says, We must lay down a law of the survival of the fittest, and if the reeds are broken, throw them away. Jesus Christ says : Throw nothing away : let us work for the saving of every life, and see that we work so carefully, with so critical a love and patience that we lose nothing at last, but the son of perdition, the son of waste, the child that must go home to the devil. Let us have no rough-and-ready treatment, however, of human life, but let us examine and separate, and encourage and cheer, and do what we can, for we are bound to save the last atom ; then if we cannot save it, we must own what we have lost : Father, I have lost none, but the son of perdition. He did not want to lose any, he did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them. If men will not be saved, even the Son of God cannot save them. To force a man into heaven is not to fill him with peace and joy ; it is to violate the harmony which he cannot appreciate. “A bruised reed,”—say some, an instrument called a reed was meant, and there was a rift in it, which spoiled the music. Jesus Christ said, we must repair this ; something must be done with this reed ; it was meant for music and we must look at it with that end in view. He does not take it, saying, There is a rift in the lute, and the music is impossible ;



rend it and throw it away. He always looks to see if a man cannot be made somewhat better. He would heal us every one. Say to him, O Bruised Reed, if I may but touch the hem of thy garment, even my life reed shall be healed, and I will take up God's music again, and be glad in God's house. Or "a bruised reed" may mean that wild beasts in rushing through to the water, or from the flood, have crushed the growing plants, so that they are bent, they no more stand upright; but Jesus Christ comes to heal them and to restore them. "And the smoking flax shall he not quench:" he will not put his foot upon it; he will rather take it up and shake it, as he only can shake, bringing a little more air to bear upon it, and still a little more, but so gradually; see how the spark whitens, how it leaps up into a kind of new life; now watch him how he regulates the shaking, and see how that which we thought was only a smoke becomes a flame, bright as fire, useful as a torch, and how it is handed on to the aid of other men.

He has his still greater qualification—the qualification of eternal hopefulness. That is where so many teachers fail, but this Man shall not fail nor be discouraged till he hath done the work. Sometimes he nearly turned round. We have seen Jesus Christ himself almost driven to despair. He could not do many mighty works here, or there, because of the people's unbelief. Still, he did not resign the work; he persevered. How many of us have resigned our position—given it up—because we have felt discouraged beyond the power of sustenance, so that we could no longer bear the weight or live in the darkness. Thus we have been less than Christ, as we must ever be; but we have not been of the quality of Christ, which we may always be. "He shall not fail nor be discouraged:" he shall not wink his eyes or knit his brow as if he were in fatal perplexity, saying in effect, I have come upon something I cannot manage, or control, or direct; I am bewildered;—and see how his face is wrinkled up into an expression of absolute dejection. Is there a wrinkle on that shining countenance? It does not mean discouragement; it was ploughed on the face by grief, but it shall yet vanish in light. Herein is the hope and herein is the confidence of the Church. Whoever resigns the evangelisation of the world, Jesus Christ is

pledged to carry it forward. Were men to set themselves against him he would say, This can be but temporary : if ye hold your peace, the very stones will cry out ; if ye are the children of Abraham, and all turn away from me, I tell you God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. Thus we renew our courage ; thus we rekindle our hope ; thus we replenish our inspiration. Where is there a Christian teacher who would not sometimes willingly withdraw from the whole service, Because, he says, the wall of hindrance is heaven-high, and I cannot advance ; my prayers seem to have come back in nothingness, all my labour has ended in vanity ; I have piped, but my piping has not been answered by the dance of delight ; I have mourned, no sufferer has blended his tears with mine ; all day long have I stretched out my hands, and no man has regarded me ?

A singular contrast may be established here as between the attitude of the Old Testament and the attitude of the New in regard to the salvation of the human race. In the Old Testament God seems to be continually withdrawing from the work. He says, It repents me that I have made man. And again he says to the heavens and to the earth, Ye may well be astonished, for amazement has filled my own heart, that I should have brought up children, and they have rebelled against me ; though Moses and Samuel were to plead with me for this people, I would not hear even these great intercessors ; my whole soul recoils from their ingratitude : I can no longer maintain my relation to this rebellious race. No such voice is heard in the New Testament. Mere deity (if we may so express ourselves) is not the same as deity incarnate, set in direct sympathetic relation with human life and human need. "Jesus wept." That is the infinite secret of the steadfastness of his love. If he had been a majesty only, he would have spurned those who sought to oppose him ; but he was a Saviour, he was the Son of God, and therefore he bore all injury ; when he was reviled he reviled not again, for it would have been loss of dignity and loss of love, and disqualification of himself for his sublime ministry. All time spent in reviling is time taken away from saving. He gave his back to the smiters, and his cheeks to them that plucked off the hair ; and still he thought he could save the world. He shall see of the

travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied. When the fight is over, there will be but one conqueror, and his name shall be Immanuel, Secret, Counsellor, Jesus of Nazareth.

All this great qualification, positive and negative, and all this power to sustain discouragement and turn it into inspiration, is found in connection with a purpose to save the Gentiles, to enlighten "the isles," to bring in the very race represented by ourselves. Thus Christ comes near to us. He is not a Saviour of the Jew only, but of the Gentile; he does not operate within the four corners of any chosen country, but on the whole world and through all the generations of men and time. This is the distinctive characteristic of the Gospel. It goes from its starting-place; it says it will not return, except bringing sheaves with it; it says: I will begin at Jerusalem, but I will go forward until I have touched every land and every island, and have translated myself into every speech, and have created speech and civilisation; and I shall come back again, and Zion shall be the praise and joy of the whole earth.

What is our response to this grand purpose? Do we doubt the qualification of Christ, God's Servant, God's upheld One, God's Elect, the Man in whom God's soul delighted, the Man upon whom the Spirit of God rested? To doubt Christ is to doubt God. Let us cast ourselves upon him. Let the isles say unto him: Blessed Son of God, thou didst care for us. Let the Gentiles say to him: Saviour of the world, when there was no man to help us we heard of thy Name, and thou didst speak to us as one who was mighty to save. If we ourselves have tested the qualifications of Christ, let us preach the Gospel to every creature.

## Chapter xlii. 5-25.

### MAJESTIC CLAIMS.

"Thus saith God the Lord, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out; he that spread forth the earth, and that which cometh out of it; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein" (ver. 5).

THAT is a grand preamble. Words of this character excite thrilling expectation. Go to Oriental lands for magnificence of description, for redundance of self-eulogium; read the Babylonian records to find how ancient kings adorned themselves with imposing titles. Something must always be allowed for Orientalism; it is not irreverent to say that something must be allowed for Orientalism in certain parts of the Bible itself. Here is a title which, standing by itself, might challenge comparison with other royal designations. We must, therefore, go further, and inquire for what purpose the title was used. This is not all sound and fury, signifying nothing; this is but a beginning; this great title only excites astonishment, creates interest, prepares the mind to hear some great revelation that is about to be made, and that takes its tone and quality from the title itself. That is the vital and impassable distance between all other titles and the title Jehovah. Kings in ancient times and eastern lands have exhausted epithets in their self-description, but one of them came nothing but boasting, vanity, self-laudation. Our enquiry turns upon the uses to which this title is about to be committed. Who is to be entrusted with it? To whom is it to be handed as a charge, entitling the messenger to go forth and work upon it, turning it to real and blessed utility? Is it, a decoration, or an authority? Is it a piece of Oriental rhetoric, or is it the very comfort of God addressed to the souls of men?

Will God thus share his title, and create co-partners of his

glory? He will never give his name to another, that that other may be equal to him, and use it for purposes other than those which harmonise with divine love: but there is a sense in which he will share his throne:—"To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne." There is a blessed sense in which the Scriptures teach that even mortal man may handle the eternity of God. Yet we need this element of majesty in the Bible. We have it in nature. Whatever is small in nature is only such relatively. The earth would be much larger if the sky were less—that all-dwarfing firmament; it makes all other things look insignificant: in themselves they may be great and precious, but when related to what is to us the best symbol of infinity they fall into nothingness. If we have, therefore, this element of majesty in nature, why not in revelation? There must be no trifling with God; even when he condescends it must be with majesty; when he draws near it must be to create astonishment and reverence, and fill the soul with awe, which alone can prepare it for deepest and highest revelations. It does us good to come near men who are greater than ourselves, for it rebukes our self-appraisal where it is exaggerated or marked by vanity; we thought ourselves wise until we heard them speak, then we fled away to resume our studies, because our acquisitions were so small. It does us good to come near great sights of all kinds. A man then puts off his shoes, and leaves his staff behind, and goes forward tremblingly, that he may hear voices from other worlds. "I will now turn aside, and see this great sight." So in page after page of the Bible, the Lord comes down in his full title, he brings with him his whole dignity; and the firmament itself closes its eyes in reverence and wonder. There is a sun which puts out our sun, paling its radiance as if in shame. Thus we must bring both the Old Testament and the New together in order to see at once the majesty and the condescension of God, the infinite grandeur and the infinite love of him who is Creator-Father. Neither is sufficient by itself. Union alone gives completeness. He who begins by creating ends by redeeming. In redeeming the world we see what value God set upon it. Viewed in the light of omnipotence, creation is nothing, it is less than a handful of dust or a wreath of smoke; but

when God comes forth to redeem what he made he writes upon it the value which he assigns to it. We must take God's estimate of God's work.

Let us now ask whether this title is ostentatious or beneficent. The answer is in the sixth verse,—

"I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles."

So then, God's eternity is to be turned to the uses of time. This is no revelation of overpowering majesty; this is the key of the door. O Messenger of the Covenant, take this key, it will open creation; the universe knows it; at its touch the lock will spring back, and thy progress will lie before thee like a straight line. This is the name to conjure with, in the noblest religious sense of that term, to bring down mountains, to raise valleys, and dry up rivers and seas. Without this name we can make no real advancement in any direction that is upward. We can dig without it, and can go to hell without it. So then the Lord himself comes forth to invest the Church with all riches: Because I live, ye shall live also: If I go, I will come again: "In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you,"—"I" and "you:" what Christ can do the Church can do: I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me: I glory in tribulation also: I have learned the divine art of turning sorrow into wine, and I drink it for the soul's comfort. The title of God, therefore, is not so much verbiage, and elaboration of eulogium, a rhetorical effort to magnify God in words; it is an inspiration and encouragement; it is a feast never to be exhausted, it is a fountain of water in the wilderness; it is the beginning and the necessity of utility; it is the guarantee of progress; it is the assurance of victory. Let us, then, take it with us everywhere:—I will go in the name of the Lord God, and make mention of his righteousness, even of his only: when I see great doors and bars and gates, I will say, Lift up your heads, fall back, ye portals, and the King of glory shall come in; I will beat them down with thy name: and when the river comes, flowing and uproariously, plunging through the great valley as if it would



drive everything before it, I will strike it with the eternal name, and make it stand back, until I have passed through on dry ground. This should be the noble language of the Church. Wherein the Church falls into fearfulness and dejection, she has forgotten her own resources, she has humbled herself into an equality with the powers of the earth, she has waited until some painted mockery of a king has passed by. The Church should always claim precedence. The state is nothing—a pasteboard frame run up in a night-time for purposes of mere convenience in the way of commerce and exchange and so-called civilisation. If there be a Church, a redeemed and sanctified life, it will go in before every beggar-prince that wants to carry his hoarded gold along with him. The Church goes by right of the divine title. The Church stands by the dignity of God. Men should sometimes realise their representative capacity and their symbolic function; and whilst they in themselves wish to be the most modest of men, yet they have to bear a testimony, and to take a position, and to advance a banner. O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain! Zion, put on thy beautiful garments! shake them from the dust, and stand up, the princess of God. All this accords with gentleness, modesty, self-obliteration in all narrow senses: and all this is consonant with the majesty of God. Let us remember that as a Church we are created anew, redeemed with the infinitely precious blood of Christ, washed and cleansed, and that we are without stain or flaw, or any such thing, a glorious Church. There are too many bent heads amongst us; too many fearful spirits; too many who say, Let gold go first, then silver, then copper, then piety. God would reverse the process; he would throw away the gold and the silver and the copper and say, This is the order of precedence: goodness first, piety at the head; gentleness, pureness, love, charity, brotherly kindness, forward. We must not reverse the processes and precedences of God.

That the title is not ostentatious but beneficent is proved also by the seventh verse—

“To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.”

That is the Saviour's title. Now here it comes down to the

earth, and tabernacles here for a while, saying, I want to be used for all that is most healthy and blessed in human progress. Here is a man come down to earth "to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house." This is the kind of man needed in all ages. We have critics enough, we have judges in great abundance, we have speculators more than can be overtaken by statistical genius; we want another kind of man, and we seek for him no better description than that which is outlined by the prophet. A man who shall open the blind eyes, bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house. We want moral helpers, social saviours, personal healers and comforters. Shall we apply these words to the Lord Jesus Christ? They will fit the occasion exactly. In him they would seem to secure their amplest and completest realisation. He came to open the blind eyes, and he did it. Said he to one man, "What wilt thou that I should do unto thee?" Said the man, "Lord, that I might receive my sight"—that I might have a larger world, that I might see all that is to be seen, that I might take possession of space and beauty, and all things that appeal to sight. The Lord said—See! When did the Lord strike any man blind who inquired for truth, and asked for the palace of wisdom, and desired to know the road to the house of understanding; when did he rebuke such an aspirant, and send him home again that he might find his education in darkness and his schooling in ignorance? Never. Christianity opens eyes, never closes them; always says, See more light; the morning cometh, rise, behold the whitening east, the glowing dawn, the uprising king of day.

The Lord sent to Saul when he prayed that his eyes might be opened, and Saul himself described the vision as marvellous light. We want, too, to be brought out of prison. The word "prison" is a large word; it signifies ignorance, prejudice, criminality, all manner of unlawful or needless or self-imposed limitation; it means independence of all the allurements, snares, fascinations, temptations, of time and space; it means spiritual freedom; it is described in the gospel as "glorious liberty." All liberty may be said to be glorious, yet there is a liberty that needs an epithet to give it just the particular accentuation which expresses its

range and quality; so the word "glorious" is attached to the word liberty. They match each other well; the words fall into blessed accord and mutual complement; they belong to one another; it is the liberty, not of the dawn, which is useful, not of the growing day, which is inspiring, but of the noontide, which is glorious. Men are in various stages of liberty. We are not all equally the free men of God. There are men even now who are under the disadvantage of prejudice. Even to-day superstition lives—chilling, fear-exciting, soul-depressing, superstition. There are those who still live in the letter of the Word. They have never felt the summer warmth of the Spirit; the juices, the sap of life may be said not to have risen in the stem of their manhood yet, even in vernal days. Others are far on; they are high up the hill; they can almost touch the sky, and warm themselves at the higher fire; they are marked by what timid souls would call audacity; and indeed when timid souls so criticise these higher freemen they speak their own language, because to them the action of the higher men would indeed be audacity. But we must not curb one another, and especially the small nature must never fix itself as the measure of manhood. Better that the great souls should say, "All others are like us," than that little invisible natures should say, There are some who have gone astray by going upward. Blessed are they who are straying towards heaven! May the pastures through which they pass be green, may they be able to quaff the water out of the river of God! Christ has come for the express purpose of opening blind eyes and releasing prisoners. The question which men ought to put to themselves is this, "Do we see; are we free, or are we blind; and are we still in prison? If the Son shall make you free, ye should be free indeed. Only the truth can give liberty; and truth is a term so large that only one other term can stretch a line upon it, and say, I am as large as you; and that other term is Love."

But here comes a great indictment:—

"Who is blind, but my servant? or deaf, as my messenger that I sent? who is blind as he that is perfect, and blind as the Lord's servant?" (ver. 19).

Israel is here referred to. The servant that ought to have seen

everything sees nothing ; the messenger that ought to have the hearing ear has lost his faculty of hearing ; and he that ought to have been perfect is blind. A curious word is this which is rendered "perfect." In sound it is like "Moslem," and it means literally, the resigned man. That is what Moslem affects to be. That is the very genius of Islam, the resigned man ; the man who says he will make no effort, because what will be will be ; he need not bestir himself in the morning, because he can effect nothing by all his labour and energy ; he will resign himself to the rocking of nature, and be lulled to rest by its soothing movement. There is a charm in fatalism. If it could call itself Calvinism it would make more progress. There is a fascination in the faith that says, Sit still ; do nothing ; hold your hands ; close your eyes, let sleep steal upon you ; and the stars will go on just the same as if you were making frantic endeavours to be wise and great and strong. But nature feels an indefinite antagonism to that base suggestion. Nature now and again rises and says, No : I was made to be active ; I know it, I feel it : why were these faculties given if they were not to be used ? Possession is inspiration : to have eyes is to be entitled to see ; to have ears means that we have a right to listen to music, and eloquence, and learning, and persuasion. Let the voice of nature prevail. To have a faculty means that that faculty is to be used. Herein is the tremendous indictment correct—"Seeing many things, but thou observest not, opening the ears, but he heareth not." To have faculties that have fallen into disuse, to have the symbols of manhood but no virility, to look a man, and yet be but a thing, to seem to have a heart and yet have no response to human want and pain,—that is the inconceivable but possible irony. Having eyes, they see not ; having ears, they hear not ; having hearts, they do not understand. Yet are they counted as of the population of the earth. A man may withdraw himself from the working force of society, and from the real manhood of the world, and may occupy room of which he is not worthy. Only they should be counted whose souls are alive. The first question should be, What are you ? What is your purpose ? What is the tone of your life ? What use do you make of your faculties ? Are you helpers of society, or burdens ? Do you carry, or are you to be carried ? Thus Christianity becomes a

most active religion. It does not count a man when he is asleep the same as it counts him when he is awake ; it counts the day population ; and there are men walking about who are really walking in their sleep, and they are not counted at all. Christianity makes no account of somnambulists in the daytime. Christianity expects us to use our faculties. Christianity in the person of its Infinite Founder, says, How is it that ye do not understand ? Ye can discern the signs of the sky, how is it that ye cannot read the signs of the times ? O fools and slow of heart ! The Church is to be the most sagacious of all institutions. The Christian is to be the most statesmanlike of all men. He is not concerned in some little problems, in some arrangements which may be thus or otherwise, and yet no great interests are affected by their distribution. He is in burning earnest, in deadly earnest ; he deals with great questions, he addresses himself to infinite difficulties ; he needs all his mental power, all his moral sympathy, all his social resources. So then, we go back to the divine title—"Thus saith God the Lord, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out ; he that spread forth the earth, and that which cometh out of it ; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein : I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles ;" I will be with thee, I will hold thy hands, I will keep thee, I will see that all thy way is marked out for thee, I will lead the blind by a way that they know not, and by paths that they have not understood. "I will make waste mountains and hills, and dry up all their herbs ; and I will make the rivers islands, and I will dry up the pools." Thus the title passes down from pompous rhetoric into beneficent service.

## Chapter xlii. 14-16.

"I will destroy and devour at once. I will make waste mountains and hills, and dry up all their herbs; and I will make the rivers islands, and I will dry up the pools. And I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight."

### GOD'S TERRIBLENESS AND GENTLENESS.

**I**T is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. It is better to fall into the hands of God than into the hands of men. Our God is a consuming fire—God is love. The combination of great power and great restraint, and, indeed, the combination of opposite qualities and uses generally, is well known in the ordinary arrangements of civilised life and the daily operation of the laws of nature. The measure of greatness is the measure of terrible-ness. What is constructiveness but the beneficent side of destructiveness? The fire that warms the chamber when properly regulated, will, if abused, reduce the proudest palaces to ashes. The river, which softens and refreshes the landscape, if allowed to escape its banks, may devastate the most fruitful fields. The engine, which is swiftly bearing the laughing child to his longed-for home, will, if mismanaged, occasion the most terrible havoc. The lightning, which may be caught and utilised by genius and skill, can burn the forest, and strike armies blind. We are familiar with such illustrations of united opposites, and our knowledge of them inspires our enterprise, and attempers with prudence the noble audacity of practical science. In the text we are confronted with the highest expression of the same truth—the mighty God is the Everlasting Father; the terrible One is gentler than the gentlest friend; he who rides in the chariot of the thunder stoops to lead the blind by a way that they know not, and to gather the lambs in his bosom.



In pointing out the terribleness of God it is not intended to appeal to fear, but to support and encourage the most loving confidence in his government. We do not say, Be good, or God will crush you; that is not virtue; that is not liberty—it is vice put on its good behaviour—it is iniquity with a sword suspended over its head; it is not even negative goodness; it is mischief put *hors de combat*. The great truth to be learned from this aspect of the case is, that all the terribleness of God is the good man's security. When the good man sees God wasting the mountains and the hills, and drying up the rivers, he does not say, "I must worship him, or he will destroy me;" he says, "The beneficent side of that power is all mine; because of that power I am safe; the very lightning is my guardian, and in the whirlwind I hear a pledge of benediction." The good man is delivered from the fear of power; power has become to him an assurance of rest; he says, "My Father has infinite resources of judgment, and every one of them is to my trusting heart a signal of unsearchable riches of mercy."

Look at the doctrine of the text in relation to bad men who pride themselves upon their success and their strength. Daily life has always been a problem to devout wisdom. Virtue has often been crushed out of the front rank. Vice has forced its way to pre-eminence. The praying man has often to kneel upon the cold stones; the profane man has often walked upon velvet. These are the commonplaces of daily study upon the affairs of men. The doctrine of the text is that there is a power beyond man's and that nothing is held safely which is not held by consent of that power. Think of wealth as a mountain, or of social position as a hill: God says, "I will make waste mountains and hills;" our greatness is nothing to him; our mountain smokes when he touches it, and our rock melts at his presence. All our gain, our honour, our standing should be looked at in the light of this solemn doctrine. We are not at liberty to exclude the destructive power of God from our practical theology. We have not to make a God, to fancy a God, or to propose a modification of a suggested God—God is before us, in his might, his glory, his love, and we have to acquaint ourselves with him. God is not to be described in parts; he is to be comprehended in the unity

of his character. A child describing the lightning might say, "It was beautiful, so bright, and swifter than any flying bird, and so quiet that I could not hear it as it passed through the air;" this would be true. A tree might say, "It was awful, it tore off branches that had been growing for a hundred years, it rent me in twain down to the very root, and no summer can ever recover me—I am left here to die;" this also would be true. So with Almighty God: he is terrible in power, making nothing of all that man counts strong, yet he will not break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax. Men are bound to be as common-sense in their theology as they are in the ordinary works of life, and in building character they are to be at least as forethoughtful and sagacious as in building their houses of stone. How do we conduct our arrangements in building a house? Suppose that it were possible for a man never to have seen any season but summer, and suppose such a man called upon to advise in the erection of a building: you can imagine his procedure; everything is to be light, because he never heard a high wind; water-pipes may be exposed, for he never felt the severity of frost; the most flimsy roof will be sufficient, for he knows nothing of the great rains of winter and spring. Tell such a man that the winds will become stormy, that the rivers will be chilled into ice, that his windows will be blinded with snow, and that floods will beat upon his roof, and if he is a wise man he will say, "I must not build for one season, but for all seasons; I must not build for fine days, but for days that will be tempestuous; I must, as far as possible, prepare for the most inclement and trying weather." That is simple common sense. Why be less sensible in building a character than in building a house? We build our bricks for severity as well as for sunshine, why build our characters with less care? If in summer we think about the frost, why not in prosperity have some thought for adversity? If in July we prepare for December, why not in the flattering hour of exultation think of the judgment that is at once infallible and irresistible? As he would be infinitely foolish who should build his house without thinking of the natural forces that will try its strength, so is he cursed with insanity who builds his character without thinking of the fire with which God will try every man's work of what sort it is.

Is not the same truth illustrated by every ship upon the great waters? The child who has only sailed his paper boat on the edge of a placid lake, might wonder what was wanted with enormous beams and bars of iron, innumerable bolts and screws, and clasps and bars of metal, in making a ship: ask the sailor, and he will answer; he says we must be prepared for something more than calm days, we must look ahead, the breakers will try us, the winds will put us to the test, we may come upon an unknown rock, we must be prepared for the worst as well as for the best. We call this prudence. We condemn its omission. We applaud its observance. What of men who attempt the stormy and treacherous waters of life without having had any regard to the probable dangers of the voyage? This is not fervent declamation. In thus putting the case we claim the credit which is due to correct analogy and conclusive argument. We prepare for the severe side of Nature—why ignore the severe aspect of God? We think of fire in building our houses—why forget it in building our character? On one side of our life we are constantly on the outlook for danger—why forget it where the destiny of the soul is concerned? When a man builds his house or his ship strongly, we do not say that he is the victim of fear; we never think of calling him a fanatic; we rather say that he is a cautious and even scientific man: so, when I make appeal to the severity of God—to his fire, his sword, his destroying tempests and floods—I am not preaching the mere terrors of the Lord, as if I would move by alarm, rather than persuade by love; I am simply faithful to facts—I am reminding you that God is not less complete than the seasons which he has made, and bidding them, in the summer of his mercies, not to forget the winter of his judgments!

The so-called success of the bad man has yet to stand the strain of divine trial. God will go through our money to see if it has been honestly obtained. He will search our reputation, and our hypocrisy will not be able to conceal the reality of the case from his all-seeing eye. He will examine our title-deeds, and if we have ill-gotten property, he will set the universe against us, until we restore it with penitence or have it wrenched out of our keeping by retributive misfortune. Yea, though our strength

be as a mountain, it shall be wasted; though it be as a hill, it shall be blown away, and the world shall see how poorly they build who build only for the light and quietness of summer. Do not say the winter is long in coming; it will come, and that is the one fact which should move our concern and bring us to wisdom. In these days, when the world is in a constant panic, when men are over-driving one another, when commerce has been turned into gambling, and sharp-shooters pass as honest men, it is needful that we all remind ourselves that God will judge the people righteously, and try all men by the test of his own holiness. Remember, we are not stronger than our weakest point, and that true wisdom binds us to watch even the least gate that is insufficient or insecure.

Look at the doctrine of the text as an encouragement to all men who work under the guidance of God. "I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not: I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight." God thus declares himself gentle to those who truly need him. He promises nothing to the self-sufficient; he promises much to the needy. The text shows the principle upon which divine help is given to men—the principle of conscious need and of willingness to be guided. Let a man say, "I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing," and God will leave him to his proud sufficiency; let him, on the other hand, feel his weakness and insignificance, and God will bless him with all the help which he requires in the most difficult passages of his life. A true apprehension of this doctrine will give us a new view of daily providences—viz., that men who are apparently most destitute may in reality be most richly enjoying the blessings of God. Clearly, we are not to judge human life by outward conditions. We are not to overlook the beneficent law of compensation. Those who apparently have least may in reality have most. Who can tell what visions of himself God grants to men who cannot see his outward works? Blindness may not be merely so much defect, it may be but another condition of happiness. Who can say that it does not bring the soul so much nearer God? Be that as it may, it is plainly taught in the text that God undertakes to lead all men

who will yield themselves to his guidance, and that their defects, instead of being a hindrance, are, in reality, the express conditions on which offers of divine help are founded. It is because we are blind that he will lead us. It is because we are weak that he will carry us. It is because we have nothing that he offers to give us all things. God, addressing himself to human weakness, is the complement of God wasting mountains and hills; God, shedding the morning dew on awaking flowers, is the complement of God affrighting the earth with tempests and vexing the sea with storms. There is an unsearchable depth of pathos in the doctrine that God is gentle to human weakness, and that he will make up with his own hands what is wanting in human faculty. Strong men seldom care for the weak, the blind are put on one side, the incapable are dismissed with impatience; but here is God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, taking the blind man's hand and leading him like a child specially beloved!

Thus it is clear that self-sufficiency on the part of man is an offence to God; not only so, it is a vexation to man himself. All efforts at completeness and independence of strength end in mortification. Towards one another we are to be self-reliant; towards God we are to be humble, dependent, all-trustful. How infinite is our folly in seeking to remove, by our own power, the mountains and hills that bar our way! God says he will remove them for us; why should we turn away his mighty arm? He claims such work as his own; why should we meddle with it as if we could do it better than he? But some of us will meddle: we persist in seeking omnipotence in our own hands, and trying to reach the tone which winds and seas obey. We will do it. The devil urges us, and we yield. He says, "Be your own God," and we snatch at the suggestion as a prize. He says, "This little mountain you might surely manage to remove;" and then we set to work with pickaxe and shovel, and lo, the mountain grows as we strike it! Still the tempter says, "It stands to reason that you must be making some impression upon it; try again;" and we try again, and again we fail—the mountain does not know us, the rock resents our intrusion, and having wasted our strength, the devil laughs at our impotence, and tells us in bitter mockery



that we shall do better next time ! Yes ! Next time—next time—and then next time—and then hell ! God says to us, when we stand at the foot of great hills and mountains, “ I will beat them into dust, I will scatter the dust to the winds ; there shall be a level path for your feet, if you will but put your trust in me.” That is a sublime offer. No man who has heard it ought to feel himself at liberty to act as if God had not made a proposition to him. And such propositions ought to endear God to our hearts. Here he is beside us, before us, round about us, to help, to lead, to bless us in every way : not a figure in the distant clouds, not an occasional appearance under circumstances that dazzle and confound us, but always at our right hand, always within reach of our prayer, always putting out his hand when we come to dangerous places. As a mere conception of God, this reaches the point of sublimity. The coarsest mind might dream of God’s infinite majesty, but only the richest quality of heart could have discovered him in the touch of gentleness and the service of condescension. Let us make such use of this revelation of the divine character as will save us from turning our theology into the chief terror of our lives. Their theology is, indeed, to some men a frightful spectre. They would be happier if they were atheists. They fitfully slumber on the slopes of a volcano, and to them heaven itself is but the less of two evils. Behold ! Behold ! I call you to a God whose very terribleness may be turned into an assurance of security, and whose love is infinite, unchanging, eternal !

Men of business ! ye whose barns are full, whose rivers overflow, on whose estates the sun has written “ Prosperity,” and into whose garner autumn has forced the richest of her golden sheaves ! Know ye that these things are all gifts of God, and that he who gave them can also withdraw them ? “ I will destroy and devour at once—I will dry up all their herbs.” He has right of way through our fields and orchards ; our vineyards and olive-yards are his, and he can blow upon them till they wither, and cause their blossom to go up like the dust. “ I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay-tree. Yet he passed away, and, lo, he was not : yea, I sought him, but he could not be found.” Not a fibre of his root could be



discovered. Not so much as a withered leaf drifted into a ditch could be traced. All gone—the great branches gone—the bark gone—the trunk gone—the root gone—and the very name had perished from the recollection of men ! It is poor prosperity that is not held by God's favour. Gold goes a little way if it be not sanctified by prayer and giving of thanks. Bread cannot satisfy, unless it be broken by God's hands. Our fields may look well at night, but in the morning they may have been trampled by an invisible destroyer. Do not say that I am urging you by fear ; it is because of coming winter that I advise men to build strongly, and it is because of inevitable judgment that I call upon men to walk in the light of righteousness in all the transactions of life.

Children of God ! especially those who are called to suffering and weakness and great unrest because of manifold defect, God offers you his hand. Are you blind ? He says, I will lead the blind. Are you full of care ? He says, Let me carry your burden. Are you in sorrow ? He says, Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will answer thee. Is there a very steep road before you at this moment—in business, in your family, in your responsibilities ? He says, I will make waste mountains and hills, and the rough places shall be made plain. So you are not alone—not alone, for the Father is with you. He is with you as a father, not to try your strength, but to increase it ; not to make experiments upon you, but to magnify his grace in you by working out for you a wonderful redemption. Rest on God. His arm, not your own, must be your strength. Fear God, and no other fear shall ever trouble you.

Let us pray ; let us pray with our whole heart, and the terrible God will show us the fulness of his mercy :—

ALMIGHTY GOD, clothed with thunder, and carrying with thee the lightning which makes men tremble with great fear, we have heard that thou canst make waste mountains and hills, and shake the foundations of the earth ; we have heard also of thy loving-kindness and tender mercy, and our souls have hoped in thy grace. We bless thee that in Christ Jesus, our only and ever sufficient Saviour, even thy terrors are blessings, and the multitude of thy mighty works show how immeasurably profound is

thy love. When thou tearest, thou dost bind up again ; when thou castest down thy people, it is that thou mayest surprise and gladden them by unlooked-for exaltation. Thou hast thy way in the whirlwind, and the clouds are the dust of thy feet. Thy chariots are twenty thousand, even thousands of thousands, yet thou stoopest to take up the weary lamb, and to revive the heart of thy children. Though thou canst thunder in thy universe until all beings pause in the silence of fear, yet canst thou speak to desponding men in a still small voice, and heal them with the gentlest comfort. • We desire to know thee in all the revealed aspects of thy nature, and to walk before thee with the carefulness of reverence and the joy of love. Thou art our refuge and strength ; thou art our shield and buckler ; thou givest grace and glory ; thou comest to us in the snows of winter and in the tender buddings of the spring ; thou temperest judgment with mercy. May the meditation in which we have engaged subdue us, yet cheer our hearts as with renewed hope ! May thy servants fear thee, O great King ; may thy saints rejoice in thee, O gracious Father ! We quail before thy power, we are made glad by thy love ; may we rejoice with trembling ! Specially draw our tenderest affections to the Cross of the dying Saviour. In that Cross we see how wonderful is thy righteousness, and how boundless is thy love. It reveals to us the terribleness of the law, and shows to us the source and sufficiency of the Gospel ; we would abide at the Cross, so mournful, yet so full of hope, until we abhor our sin, and become partakers of thy holiness. Blessed One, Life of all life, and Glory of all light, Creator, Father, Saviour, complete in us the hallowed mystery of redemption by the Cross. Amen.

## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, we are thine, and not another's; thou dost own us wholly. Thou hast said in thy book, All souls are mine. Thou hast created us, and not we ourselves; we are the work of thy hands; thine image is upon us; thou wilt not forsake those whom thou hast formed. We have natural claims upon thee, and these thou wilt not reject; thou wilt honour them; thou art honouring them by daily providence, by minutest care, by most patient forbearance, by ineffable gentleness. But thou hast also come to us in our condition as sinners, rebellious, disloyal souls, that have cast off the sceptre of Christ and prayed for another dominion. Thou hast redeemed us with the precious blood of Christ; thou canst not, wilt not, give us up. Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die? is the question of thy love. Thou hast established amongst us the Cross of thy Son; above the superscription of Pilate thou hast written, Herein is love. We would come to the Cross, tell thee of all our sin, ask thee to burn it out of us, not with judgment but with love, and to heal us—O mystery of healing—by the blood of Jesus Christ thy Son. Thou knowest that we have to pass through the water and through the fire, thou knowest the heat of the one and the violence of the other; but they are all under thy control, loving, mighty, saving Father. So why care we? For what should we care? There is but one Almighty, we need no other. Into thy hands we fall; in thy hands we rest; under thy providence we shall grow and be established, and our purposes in Christ shall be consummated. Dry our tears, many and hot; save us from fear; from dejection, from despair; bless us with the inspiration and confidence of hope, and with the strength of men whose trust is in the living God. Amen.

## Chapter xliii.

### THE RIGHT OF THE CREATOR.

THE chapter opens with the words "But now." They indicate some change in the tone of the narrative, or appeal, or judgment. A very notable change they indicate, quite a miracle of a transformation, possible only to the Almighty musician; none other could have ventured upon this metamorphosis. We have read "Therefore he hath poured upon him the fury of his anger, and the strength of battle: and it hath set him

on fire round about, yet he knew not; and it burned him, yet he laid it not to heart" (xlii. 25). Then the forty-third chapter opens with the words "But now." It is as if winter died and summer were born on the same day. There is no interspace; we are out of the snow and amongst the flowers at a bound; we are away from the scorching fire into the very peace of God as if by one breath. There are many miracles which have not been indicated as such. We have been in the habit of expecting a miracle to create a space for itself, saying, with some flourish of trumpets, I am about to take place: make room for me, and keep your eyes open, and see what course I take, for I am unquestionably a wonder of God. But there are miracles that ask for no observance; they appeal by their quietness; they steal in upon us, and are completed before we quite knew they were about to begin. Moral miracles are greater than material wonders, signs, and tokens. Spiritual ministries abound in all the elements of noblest amazement, infinitely beyond the miracles that are done in wind and water and fire, and matter generally. But who so deaf as Israel? who so blind as Jacob? The prophetic faculty itself remains only in form and skeleton; all the indwelling power has gone: otherwise, how full of music would be our life, and how full of gratitude all the song of our being! then every morning would be a miracle, every dawn a triumph to God, every bud and every blossom a sign and pledge that the Almighty was amongst us, the Eternal Husbandman dressing the vineyard of earth. Let them say that the day of miracles has gone who have only had vulgar miracles to think about, miracles wrought in clay, stupendous wonders accomplished in insignificant mud. Eternal miracles follow the soul in all its outwinding and outgoing; they are the perpetual seal of the divine presence.

In reviewing Providence men do not go far enough back. The Lord himself always takes a great sweep of time. Here is an instance in point—"But now thus saith the Lord that created thee . . . and he that formed thee." No argument is built upon what happened an hour ago. That itself is only part of the argument, and must be taken into view by those who would form a complete and just criticism of Providence. God always

sets forth the whole case. It is thus the picture grows ; it is by no one expenditure of paint, and no one exercise of the artistic hand, it is by a mystery of light and shade, that the whole miracle is completed. So God would have us go back to the beginning of things. This is the method of his Book : " In the beginning God created,"—there we drop our slate and pencil, our arithmetic, and our whole *organon* of reckoning, with its treacherous rules, treacherous because inadequate to the calculation of the infinite disc upon which things are evolved and completed. So here God takes the individual or the nation, the family or the constituency, of what scope soever, back to the day of creation. Is it an individual ? the Lord does not say, Think what was done yesterday, and see how incidentally here and there I have been very kind to thee. He takes the individual back to the creation hour, to the first breath, to the first flash of the eye, the first consciousness of the being, and says, Reckon from that point : pick out nothing, either blessing or curse : read the writing, in all its complexity ; mark how it grows, extends, contracts, enlarges, withdraws, assumes colour, and takes upon itself the mystery of suggestion, and throbs with the marvel of impulse, always beating in upward and heavenward directions. Man cannot learn this lesson easily ; he has a short memory ; he thinks of what occurred one week since ; he seems to have lost the genius of accumulation ; he supposes that the whole building is in one course of stones,—not knowing that it is intended to grow, until it becomes all points, shooting upward into the blue sky. Idiots are they in God's sanctuary who talk only about the anecdotes of life,—philosophers they who grasp both the east and west, and have eyes to see the line which connects the points. Thus God will have us go back to creation day, to formation time, and take in all the childhood, all the youthhood, all the manhood, all the education and strife and discipline, all the attrition and all the harmony, all the week-days and all the Sabbath-days ; and he would bid us watch the mystery of time, until it comes out in blossoming and fruitfulness and benediction. We should have no pain if we had the right line of review and pursued it, and comprehended it, in its continuity and entirety. One day corrects another ; one period of life redresses another ; and thus we pass from judgment to

judgment, and from grace to grace, and the whole must be looked back upon, until it shapes itself into a pavilion and sanctuary of God. Blessed are they who have eyes that can review the whole mystery and development of life. But there are many creations. Formation is not a single act. God is always creating life, and always forming it. There is an individual existence; there is a national organisation; there are birthdays of empires and birthdays of reform. In the instance given in this verse the creation was official rather than personal:—"But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel." "Jacob" and "Israel" are not the names of any particular individual, only solitary life: they are compendious designations; they point to periods of construction, formation, inspiration, when a man became a nation, when a wrestler became a prince, and when a prince was entitled to bear in official senses the very name and dignity of God. We are many men in one—the obscure citizen, the quiet resident, the unknown neighbour, the man who employs other men, the head of a family, the conductor of a great business, the leader charged with the inspiration which means sagacity, foresight and forethought, which encompasses all the ends of nations; and so the mystery of mankind expands and enlarges, and the Lord comes down to say that he did it all:—I formed the individual, I formed the official man—patriot, statesman, philosopher, poet, universal linguist, man in whose voice there is a tone for every one, in whose life there is a touch that makes other life new and young.

Thus the Church must recognise its period of creation and formation. Jacob was not always a people; Israel was not always a significant name, a symbol in language; and individuals are gathered together into societies, and they are charged with the administration of the kingdom of Christ, and as such they must go back and remember their Creator, and adore their Maker, and serve their Saviour, and renew their inspiration where it was originated. God thus comes down amongst us with the charter of creation in his hand, and would say in human words, I come to thee by right of creatorship; I have something to say to thee that will go into the very centre and core of thy being; as thy Creator I hold the key of the inmost recesses of thy nature,



and as thy Former I have somewhat to whisper in thine innermost ear." Men come to us by certain rights: why should not God come by the same authority? There are some men to whom we would not speak otherwise than in the language of shallow courtesy, uttering words that are but wind; to other men we would deliver up the very soul, saying, Read it all, and tell us what to do when there is no help in us for ourselves. By what right do they come? By the right of sympathy; by the right of understanding; by the right of eternal kinship. That right is acknowledged; the possessors of it are hailed; at their approach the door flies open, and hospitality is written upon every corner of the roof. God thus produces his credentials, his certificate; he comes to us by right of having formed every bone in our body, and having breathed into our nostrils the breath of life, and having touched us with so much divinity as makes us men.

Right relations to God on the part of man should be realised. All presumption is saved by the open avowal of God himself, for in beginning the interview he says amongst his first words, "Thou art mine." He has a right to speak to his own. How did Israel or Jacob become God's?—I have "created thee . . . formed thee . . . redeemed thee . . . called thee." That is claim enough. It is a growing claim. This appeal rises into climax, into convincing and triumphant words. I have "created thee;" that is the basal line: "formed thee;" given thee shape and relation: "redeemed thee;" paid for thee: "called thee by thy name;" like a friend or child: "thou art mine." Yet all this is in the Old Testament! Do we not fly from the Old Testament into the New that we may have some sight of the tenderness of God? There is no need for such flight. There are tenderer words about God in the Old Testament than there are in the New. Asked to cull flowers that are charged with the eloquence of pathos and sympathy and kindness, I should hasten to the Old Testament, for there the flowers grow thickly on the infinite field. The New Testament indeed has a touch in it which it could not have had but for the Old Testament. Even the Christ of the New Testament is only the fully formed and perfectly revealed Christ of the Old Testament; for he himself began at Moses. This is another confirmatory instance of the method

of Providence—always beginning far back, and taking in the whole sweep and circuit of history in order to establish the most modern argument.

“Thou art mine ; three little words, three little syllables ; a child’s motto ; words that might be printed by a little hand and sent as a message of love ; words that might be engraved on a signet ring : yet words the whole meaning of which the firmament has not space enough to hold the entire development. God condenses his speech. His condensation is like his creation. His sentences are often like grains of mustard seed, very small in themselves or in their initial form, but having in them such power and faculty of expansion and enlargement as shall mean in the long run infinite harvesting. Do we realise our relation to God ? Do we suppose we belong to ourselves ? Are we foundlings in the universe ? Is there any one who comes forth to claim us ? Are there not children who wander about on heaths and parks and wide spaces, and at eventide do not know their way home ; and are they not taken care of by the constabulary, and in the morning is there not someone who comes and says, That is mine : she is mine : he is mine ? Sweet voice ! voice with authority subdued into gentleness, and the more likely to be true because of its quietness. There is instant recognition between the two ; no formal proof or affidavit is required ; it is obvious to the eyes of observers that a true recognition has been established. It is even so with us. We are often lost. We adventure into open spaces and into boundless tracts, and when the shadows come we cannot tell just where we are. Blessed be God, if the night cometh, so doth the morning ; and in the morning he says to us, “Thou art mine.” We are claimed, and reclaimed, and taken home, and never chided because we foolishly lost ourselves in the night.

This relation carries everything else along with it. After this, there can be nothing but detail :—

“When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee ; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee : when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned ; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee” (ver. 2).

All that is something merely to be recognised, and hurried

over, with a swiftness that barely recognises, and yet with a consciousness of grasp and triumph that means security. Could we not be spared passing through the waters? No. Might we not escape the rivers of God? Impossible. Could we not reach the further land where the summer breathes and flowers and sings without going through the valley of fire? No. He is a man without experience who has not often been drenched in deep floods, and often been exposed to the fury of furnaces heated seven times more than was wont. He who has come successfully through flood and furnace is a man who may be talked to with spiritual advantage; he is not a severe critic, he is not inspired with the genius of rebuke, but he is gifted, endowed, richly blessed, with the power of understanding other men, patiently waiting for them, and giving them assurance that after all their erratic wandering and eccentric action and motion, they will come to equipoise, they will realise the rest, the peace, the infinite tranquillity of God. It is easy to know a man who has often been drenched and often had struggles in the fire. He is a mysterious speaker. There is infinitely more in his speech than can be discovered at first from his words; yea, his words grow in meaning; the years bring their interpretation to his mystic and solemn expressions; then we suddenly say we remember now what he said, and how he said it; at the time there was mystery, and there is mystery still,—only at first there was a mystery of darkness, and now there is a mystery of light.

We must all pass through the water, and through the fire: how are we to pass? Alone? We may never come out. I beheld, and one like unto the Son of God was with them in the burning fiery furnace: when they came out the smell of fire had not passed upon them. The fire is a lion that knows God; he lays his hand upon its burning mane, and quiets the infinite cruelty, and turns it into a blessing. Have no fear of water and fire, for they stand as symbolical expressions for all manner of trials, because they are all under God's control. No man can do you the slightest harm. Even critics cannot take the bread out of your mouth. Foolish are they who suppose that anybody can do them the slightest harm, except for the passing moment: and there shall come compensation and advantage that shall make the

sufferer bless the critic for his unintentional kindness. "Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above." As for thee, thou black devil, thou couldst not have touched me if thou hadst not asked God's permission to try my quality. Thou canst not add one link to thy chain, thou diabolic being. Even thou, blackest of the black herd of night, art a creation and a serf of God.

Never stand up for your friend. That ought to be the policy and the inspiration of every Christian. There can be no humiliation to an honourable man so intolerable as to be told that somebody has been "standing up" for him. We must live in God. Righteousness is its own defence. Yet there are those who unintentionally inflict wounds where they meant to pay compliments: their silence would have been a eulogium; their defence is an insult. God will take care of his own, as all providence testifies. "Put up thy sword into the sheath:" little, impetuous, foolish nature, thou dost suppose that by drawing a sword thou art doing wonders; they are only wonders of folly: "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?" A shallow life lives upon public recognition or friendly notice, and cannot exist without approbation. The love of approbation means vanity, and vanity grows by what it feeds on. The true Christian must live in his Master, follow the Captain of his salvation, commit his spirit into the hands of God, at the end of fifty years we will see how it all stands. Thus when some great historical character has been impeached or assaulted or humiliated, people come in the long-run to ask who it was that did it. Precisely so! Great infinite space asks who? and none can tell. Providence is a series of miracles. Every day is a new testament of wonders and signs wrought by God. Every pulse in its latest throb says, God lives, God loves, God saves; and so the little preacher ticks and beats and palpitates, and in all its vital action testifies God is good. Not drowning is as great a miracle as resurrection. The rivers shall not overflow thee: they want to do so; see how they come plunging down! but they break upon thee, and thou standest up a living pillar, a living witness, unhurt by their impotent rage,

There are great epochs or dates of life. Hence the Lord says in the fourth verse,—

“Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee.”

How many birthdays are there in one life? There are two in this small section of Scripture—the first, “but now;” the next, “since thou wast precious in my sight,”—since thou wast reconciled unto me, since thou didst recover thyself by my ministry from thy disobedience, since thou didst come into right relations with me, since thou didst knock at the door a returning prodigal and I opened it with my own hands and we held together the feast of love,—since that time, that radiant hour, that summer morn, that memorable moment. Date your birthdays from your regeneration; bury the old nature, and live in the new. “Fear not.” To be fearful is to be faithless. He who fears forgets to pray. He who rises from his knees and fears, has been praying downward, not upward. It is God that works. Man cannot frustrate God’s purposes. If he has resolved to make thee great and powerful and influential, O Israel, O Jacob, none can hinder. It is part of the necessity of the divine sovereignty that God must succeed. Here let us rest; taking care however to observe that there is always something which God asks us to do. We are to keep near himself; we are to honour him in the water and in the furnace; we are to take no credit to ourselves for preservation; we are evermore to bless the living, loving hand that holds and guides us, and then rendering the honour due unto his name rivers shall flow back at our approach, and great seas shall open themselves and create a dry pathway for us, and wildernesses shall become gardens whilst we tarry in them. “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” “Having, therefore, these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves.” To have a promise is to have a call to discipline. To be blessed from heaven is to be inspired in the direction of self-immolation. To know that God is coming is to feel the need of being prepared for his advent.

## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, thy greatness is thy goodness: because thou art great thou art kind. Thine omnipotence is pledged on behalf of those who trust thee in Christ Jesus the Lord; a great voice comes down from heaven, saying, All things are yours; and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's. Yea, and voices rise from thy church, saying, If God be for us, who can be against us? It is God that justifieth, who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea, rather, that is risen again, and is now on the right hand of God. So, then, all things are on the side of those who trust thee and love thee at the Cross; no manner of good shall be withheld from them; thou wilt withhold no blessing from him that walketh uprightly. He is not to measure his strength by himself, but by thine omnipotence; he carries the thunder of God. We bless thee for the exceeding great and precious promises, for they nourish and comfort the soul with infinite solace; we fall back upon them, and acknowledge them with religious thankfulness. Nor do we accept them as mere comfort, but as inspirations, encouragements to higher and more strenuous endeavour, so that we may turn them into noble actions, and prove how deep our trust is by showing the reality of our sacrifice. God is with us, and the blessed Son, and the eternal Spirit; we have all things and abound. We cannot fail in this war; we cannot be outrun in this race; this feast can never be exhausted; it is spread in the banqueting-chamber of creation, it is laid by the hands of God. Amen.

## Chapter xliii. 22.

"Thou hast been weary of me, O Israel."

## WEARY OF GOD.

GOD knows what is the matter with us. He knows whether it is unbelief, or indifference; whether it is a new and perplexing view, or whether it is a closing of the eyes and a total disregard of all aspects of life. Does he care for us enough to consider what our relation to him is in reality? Does he keep some thermometer by which he can mark the rise and fall of our zeal? Surely there must be a thermometer somewhere, for ever and anon we find in the Bible distinct indications of change—now



it is a rise and now it is a fall ; now we are weak, now we are strong ; at one moment we are regarded as faint, at another moment we are registered as courageous. One man kept the record, and wrote with a strong hand, "Weary not in well doing." "Ye did run well ; who did hinder you?" Life is not lived without notice, without record ; there is a distinct and daily and momentarily registration of every pulse that beats in us, every aspiration that stirs our life upward, every desire that draws us as thirst draws the hart to the water-brooks.

Here is a distinct complaint : "Thou hast been weary of me, O Israel : " thou hast had enough of me ; thou hast been with me and in my service to the point of satiety ; thine ear is sated with my name, and thy heart is surfeited with my memory and my service. Is it possible to become weary of the worship and service of God ? We know by experience how possible and even easy it is. There are times when we are weary of church, and prayer, and service of every kind. It is best to acknowledge this lest we excuse our weakness with a lie. At the same time we should look at the weariness discriminatingly lest we load ourselves with needless reproaches. First, let there be frank confession : we can make no progress until we have washed our hands, then we may reason with God, and God will reason with us. First, he says, wash your hands ; put away the evil of your doings : now let us reason together. As a matter of fact, the Church is weary of God, the age is tired of religion, the Church is an incubus upon society. Were we to leave the charge there we should wholly misrepresent the case. Yet we lose nothing by frankness of confession, provided we limit our confession to occasional moods and intermittent experiences, and do not confound the real solid settled habit of mind with transient emotions or sensations or declensions. Let us face the difficulty squarely and broadly. We never gain anything by evading difficulties : they are not to be dodged, they are to be removed. A day of confession may be a day of blackness, like the darkness which immediately precedes the dawn. We shall be the better for telling God that he is perfectly correct in his judgment when he says that we are often weary of him. But may we not become weary of mere ceremony, or form, or routine ? That weariness does not always relate to the inner

quality, the spiritual reality and truth, but it relates to the mechanical iteration of duties, observances, rites, and ceremonies; the turning of that great wheel has a lulling effect upon us, so much so that we are asleep when we thought we were beginning to pray. Let us discriminate then. After all, it may not have been real worship we were weary of, but simulated worship, mechanical repetition, which had degenerated into lifelessness and monotony.

Sometimes our weariness is physical. Who can add up the debts of the body? Who can send in a true bill of particulars to the flesh? How it drags us down, overshadows us, mocks us, aggravates its own weight, until we cannot lift it, and then it suffocates us with heavy oppressiveness. Others are physically weak; they suffer on the other side of fleshly limitation and burdensomeness; they are not full-blooded, they inherit a thousand difficulties, perplexities, blindnesses, which they cannot explain and cannot escape; the head aches, the poor strength gives way under the increasing burden, the eyes become so dim that they cannot see whether the hand is going to the right or to the left or seizing the right instrument. God knows it all, and he will not judge the weak one harshly. He has special promises for the weak, and as for his Son it is among his glories that he has the tongue of the learned, and is able to speak a word in season to him that is weary. Let us here pluck up courage like men who have heard a message from the King, and are told that weakness is not faithlessness when it can be traced to physical causes.

May we not sometimes be conscious of a weakness that is reactionary? We are not yet conscious of immortality; we are yet in the body, we bear about the writing of condemnation in the flesh; we have passed through regeneration, but not through resurrection, and our doctrine is that resurrection must complete what regeneration began; meanwhile, we have to encounter all the difficulties and disadvantages connected with the flesh; we have been in high excitement, and the natural consequence is that we fall correspondingly in moral enthusiasm, in spiritual rapture and ecstasy. We cannot always be upon the mountain. Now

and again God gives us mountain air and mountain views and mountain light, and we think it is going to continue so evermore ; when, lo ! we are suddenly brought down the hill into the damp relaxing valleys, where our strength gives way, where we forget much of what we have seen in the upper places and sacred liberties of the elevated region. We have been in such rapture that it would seem as if blank atheism alone could be its counterpart. How far is it from the zenith to the nadir ? Remember, that we, too, have our zenith, our highest point ; and our nadir, our lowest point ; but still, whether at the one or at the other, we are in God's universe, and are reckoned amongst his stars, or at least among the paler beams that drop from the minor planets. Where weariness comes from reaction it must not be judged harshly. As well say that a man is a traitor to the stewardship of life because he has been working so hard all day that he has fallen into a deep sleep at night ; rather count his sleep a tribute to his industry than credit his industry with a flaw on account of his slumber.

There is a sense in which our very weariness may be an honour to us. Sometimes our weariness is a protest against vain service or perfunctory worship ; then it is to our honour. We are men who say, " We become weary of this." Religion is life, or it is nothing ; religion is passion, or it has no meaning ; Christianity is a Cross, or it is a mockery. Where men would give us stones for bread we have a right to become weary. Congregations should fall asleep under any man who offers them a scorpion for an egg, a stone for bread. It would be the severest rebuke that could be administered to a traitorous trustee that his audience should slumber when he thus mocks the desire of the human heart. Before, therefore, condemning ourselves too severely for weariness, let us institute a process of examination, and let us be content to abide by fact.

Having thus cleared the ground of some possible misconceptions, we have only brought ourselves face to face with the appalling fact that the soul may become really weary of God. We have lost nothing of standing ground by making confessions and distinctions, but if we have accepted these in the right spirit

and measure we are the better prepared to face the appalling charge that we who once loved the Saviour with a passionate affection have become the slaves or the victims of rival claims. We think we know the prayer before it is uttered; we suppose ourselves to be perfectly familiar with the hymn before the tune has made itself heard; we think we know all the preacher is going to say before he opens his mouth; and as for the Bible we suppose ourselves, with deadly delusion, to have read it—a miracle which no man can accomplish. The Bible is always to be read; it has a thousand beginnings, it has no end. On the other hand, how prone we are to blame the preacher for our weariness, and to credit the service with our indifference! How often shall we repeat the doctrine that a good hearer makes a good preacher! and how often shall we reiterate the view that the hearer is as much bound to be prepared as is the preacher! Is all the preparation to be in the pulpit? Is the minister always to be a radiant angel, eloquent with praise and prayer? and is the hearer to be but an indifferent listener? When the hearer hastens to the church, saying, I will see my God to-day, I will meet my Lord this morning; may the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, inspire the teacher that he may see far and clearly, and speak wisely and well,—that hearer will never be disappointed. We are always in danger of weariness through what we call the monotony of life. There is not sufficient distinction between the days. We easily fall into circumstances in which we forget the succession of days. A man who is on the sea day after day has sometimes to inquire what day it is, what date it is; the days are blurred into one another, and the man cannot distinguish in the confusion. So it is with life in some of its broadest aspects. One day is so like another; the same bell rings, the same meal is spread, the same duty calls, and by-and-by we become weary of it all. Then there is our conscious limitation: how far can we go? We know almost to a mile where we must stop. Our courage is not allowed to overleap certain lines: it would do so; sometimes it seems to say, This shall be a day of liberty, and I will know more than I have ever known before of God's method; to-day I may be able to force the divine hand, and see what is next to be done; I will not live in the little cage of to-day, I will live and

sing in the great liberty of the future. This cannot be done. We are still puzzling over the same old lesson ; again and again we recur to first principles ; often we try to whisper ourselves into a new faith by promising ourselves that we shall yet see what we have not before beheld. Thus every day is a day of disappointments ; the evening and the morning are not one day ; the morning comes in with great promises ; the evening closes with great disappointments. We are always just about to enter, yet our fingers cannot quite grasp the handle of the door ; we are just about to seize the prize, and it recedes, and Tantalus burns with thirst ; we are sure that to-morrow we shall see the fuller light, and to-morrow is as dull and grey as yesterday ; we say, At midday we shall hear the blast of the trumpet and go forth to meet the descending King, and forget time's troubles in the quiet and joy of eternity,—and lo ! at midday we hear but a thunderstorm, and lose sight of one another in sevenfold darkness ; thus our patience dies, and the soul sinks in great weariness. What a trial to every mind this constant repetition of religious service must be ! It is a heavy trial to the conductor of such services. How much we expect of the poor man who leads our worship and directs our studies : what little pity we have for him ! Every Sabbath he must perform a miracle of resurrection upon our dead piety ; we have been in the world six days, buying, selling, getting gain, or making losses, we have forgotten the whole conception of God, and we expect some brother man to come and revive us and recreate us and make us fit instruments to be played upon, and having retuned the instrument he must discourse the very music of heaven upon us, or we complain of inferiority, inability, monotony.

From the divine side there comes a lesson that ought not to be overlooked :—"Thou hast not brought me the small cattle of thy burnt offerings" (ver. 23). Here the text is difficult of English representation. Where others so mighty have failed we shall not attempt to succeed ; but may we not pause and ask whether some emphasis may not be laid upon the designation "the small cattle" ? Do not many men fail in religious details ? They are emphatic in their stupendous word-creed, but they do not bless some little child on the road to church, or bring some wandering

soul to the Church home. We might bring a little crowd with us if we cared to do so. We could give away so much alms on the road to church that people would say, Where is that man going? we must see the destiny of so good a soul! What if they were thus led into the church? We do certain great or conspicuous things, and we forget the small cattle, the little offerings and tributes. Every omission is noticed: "Thou hast bought me no sweet cane with money, neither hast thou filled me with the fat of thy sacrifices" (ver. 24). Does God care for our sweet cane? Does he like to see us spending a trifle upon some cane stick that we may take it and offer it as if it were a flower? Yet he hath no need of any service of the kind; the silver and the gold are his, and the cattle upon a thousand hills; all rams that browse, or cattle that feed in Nebaioth or on Kedar are his: yet it pleases him that we should with some small piece of money buy sweet cane. Observe how he notes the omissions! This might be the very voice of Christ who said to Simon the Pharisee, "I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment." What an eye is the eye of Omniscience! It notices every slip and flaw and omission. That would, indeed, be a miserable declaration to make if it stood alone; but it only leads to the fuller declaration that it notices every cup of cold water, every widow's gift, every child's service. God is not unrighteous to forget your work of faith and labour of love. He challenges Israel:—"Put me in remembrance: let us plead together: declare thou, that they mayest be justified." Translated:—"Remind me if thou canst of thy merits;" if I have forgotten aught, tell me what I have forgotten, if I am charging thee by mistake, correct my mistake. "Remind me of my promises" may be another translation of the word. But we accept the words as a challenge. The Lord has made a charge upon us, and now he says. Put me in remembrance, if I have forgotten anything: if thou hast had thy small cattle with thee, show me them. He would apologise to us if we could convict him of having made an omission.



The Lord is weary of us sometimes. What wonder? "Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them." Is our weariness actual, explicable, yea, as it were religious, or an aspect of our religion? Does it come of brokenheartedness? Then there is a special word to each: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." In this sense we are all welcome on the very ground of our weariness. Let us say, Lord, thou art right, thy judgment is true; we thought sin would be a pleasure, a song, and a banquet of delights; we said sin is an easy weight, and we put on its yoke, saying it will take little or no strength to carry: but we were wrong; sin has eaten our life, blinded our vision, excluded the light; it has grown little by little and day by day, until we feel as if we were carrying mountain piled on mountain. Wilt thou now pity us? We have no right to ask even for pity, for this is sin, not misfortune, we have brought it all upon ourselves; but somehow, whether from mother's speech or thine own written Book, or a voice in the heart other than our own, we have come to feel that after all our weariness shall prevail where our strength could do nothing, and where thou, O Son of God, wouldst pass a Pharisee in disdain thou wilt stop to talk to a blind man, and thou wilt not leave him until he sees how high is thy bright blue heaven. Let us renew our vows. We are all weary, but there is a weariness that is no shame; if we are weary of good because we want to do evil, if we are weary of discipline because we want the licence of iniquity, then is our weariness a reproach and an abomination. When we do one-half for the Church what we do for ourselves we shall have some right to be weary. How men slave for themselves! How they gather it all together, and when they are putting out their palsied hand for the last increment, they and their burden together fall into the open grave. What if a voice should say, Thou fool! thou fool!

## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, the living, the living shall praise thee, as we do this day. Thy works towards us have been wonderful in love; thou hast magnified thy mercy towards us, so that we can now say, His mercy endureth for ever. Thou art merciful unto the children of men always, but peculiarly merciful unto those who look upward and expect thee with their love and cry unto thee with sincerest desire; towards all such thy mercy is tender mercy and thy kindness is loving kindness. Who can tell what mystery of love thou canst work out; who can say where God shall terminate his ministry of pity? We know not what thou wilt do, but it will be worthy of thyself, it will be measured upon the scale of eternity, it will be glorious in majesty, or tender in compassion; upon it shall thy signature be found, and we know in very deed that thy signature is Love. For all thy tender care, thy patient endurance, thy longsuffering, how can we bless thee? Thou mightest have cut us off in the midst of our days, and hurled us away like a shepherd that had no tent; but thou hast spared us, and tried us, and renewed our opportunities, and in manifold ways hast thou shown thy tender interest in us, if haply we might be recovered from the end of our ways, from the ruin that lies at the end of our paths. What shall we say of the Cross of Christ, the greatest manifestation of all of the love and pity, the righteousness and mercy, of the living God? Herein is love: while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. If thou hast not spared thine only begotten Son, but freely delivered him up for us all, we need have no care, no fear, no doubt; thou wilt also with him freely give us all things—all rest, all conquest, all heaven. May we realise this inheritance of joy, may we know that this is so in very deed; may no man come and steal away our faith, or poison our trust, or pervert our judgment. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory for ever. May we rest in thine almightiness; may we hide ourselves in the sanctuary of thy love. Amen.

## Chapter xlv. 5.

"I girded thee, though thou hast not known me.

## UNCONSCIOUS PROVIDENCES.

WE sometimes say that we cannot think how it is that we have been so honoured and prospered, for we really do not deserve it. We have heard some say that it is a wonder they

are here at all. They were such sickly children, their mothers said they never could rear them; many a time they had been given up, and it was always thought impossible that so frail a thing could ever come to years of maturity. A man wonders how he has come to his position, his wealth, his fame, his influence—he cannot make it out, he is simply confounded by his success, and doubly so when he remembers the failure of men much more able than himself. He says, “How is this? They were better born, they had larger education, they had ampler opportunities of advancement—where are they now?” The digger cannot find the roots in the earth, yet it hath pleased God to make him thus and so.

How is it that the bruised reed has not been broken? How is it that the smoking flax has not been quenched? How is it that the little one has become mightier than a thousand, and how is it that the weak one has chased ten thousand and put them to ignoble flight? Explain how it is that a wisp of straw has become as a sword in a weak hand, before which the enemy has fled to the gate. We allow that these things are so: they are not the dreams of the religious imagination: we can certify that every point named is a point of fact—what is the explanation? We are obliged to believe in ghostly circumstances, if we may not believe in ghostly personages. We say we do not believe in ghosts: but that there are ghostly circumstances in life no thinking man will venture to deny. When, therefore, we look upon the ghostly circumstances, it becomes rather easy to cross the less-than-cobweb line that separates between the circumstances and the personages. Just as if you propound the proposition or the inquiry, There is a devil,—or, Is there a devil? I say, “I do not know, by my unassisted reason.” But when I see the infinite devilishness that is in society, it becomes too easy to believe that there may not be one devil, but many.

We cannot rid ourselves of these ghostly circumstances, these riddles and enigmas that start up in life and challenge replies when there is no answer in our imagination, but when there is an echo in our consciousness which says the inquiry is founded upon fact, and the answer will be seen only within the lines that

are distinctively and solemnly religious. The text gives us the religious explanation. The man spoken to did not know what he was doing, he had no idea of the value and force of the weapons he was wielding, and the purposes he was carrying out, but at the last he got his surname, Shepherd of Jehovah, at the last a face shone upon him that had been hidden in thick mist: God said, "I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me: I have girded thee, though thou hast not known me." Let us recount the story, and then proceed to its analysis and the inquiries which may be justly founded upon it.

Cyrus the Persian had conquered the Babylonian kings of Assyria who had carried the Jews into captivity. Cyrus, by overthrowing the kings of Babylon, had the destiny of the Jews peculiarly in his own hand. The Persian religion was primitively the religion of one God; it was monotheistic, and therein was found a point of sympathy between the Persian prince and the captive Jews. The Babylonian temples, on the other hand, were set up for the worship of gods many, and lords many, and were emphatically dens of thieves, being enriched with the spoils of many cruel wars. Cyrus was the first Gentile friend of the Jews, the first Gentile that ever stretched out a hand to them, and he had the privilege of becoming their liberator and their restorer. Hence in the long run he was surnamed of God "the anointed of the Lord." For him God brake in pieces the gates of brass and cut in sunder the bars of iron, and history, from Herodotus to Xenophon, has not recorded one evil or ungenerous word of the mighty and heroic Cyrus, the Persian soldier.

How did all this happen? The text gives the explanation. "I have surnamed thee, I have girded thee: thou wast an unconscious minister; thou didst not know whose arms were round about thee, thou didst not even know me by name. But man cannot exclude me from his little universe; even though he deny my existence and denounce my claim—I am still there. I water the garden of the atheist, and bring his flowers to summer bloom and his fruits to autumnal glory. Men deny me, curse me, flee from me—I am still round about them, and their life is more precious to me than is their blasphemy detestable, and until the

very last I will work for them and with them, and if they go to perdition it shall be through the very centre of my heart's tenderest grace." "I girded thee, though thou hast not known me." How true it is that we do not know the full measure and value of any work we are doing. We see but part of it. Cyrus regarded himself merely as a soldier: he went down to Babylon for strictly military purposes: the deliverance of the Jews did not so much as enter into his imagination. We cannot tell what we are doing. We cannot follow a single word of our own: we hear its first vibration in the air, but what it will do afterwards in ever multiplying and ever expanding circles we cannot tell. We are quoting to-day our father's words, though he has been dead these fifty years; we are calling to memory a mother's prayers, though she began to sing in heaven some quarter of a century ago. Things are not cut short off: they have outlooks and outgoings and manifold relationships, tentacles too fine for the naked eye to see, but always laying hold of something else, and growing by what they grasp.

Our programme is a short one: it is this. "We will go into such and such a city, and abide there a year, and buy and sell and get gain." Very well. We put a full stop there: God puts a comma: our punctuation is unskilled and unwise, God's punctuation alone measures out the languages, and metes in fair proportion the weird and solemn music of life. We cannot tell what lives we touch, what thoughts we start, what suggestions we convey, what impulses we stir. The hearer does not confess the full weight of our ministry: he says, "It is so," or, he will think about it, or he passes swiftly from that thought to another; but afterwards it recurs, he eats bread in secret, which at first he appeared to despise, and in concealment he drinks the water which we offered him, and which he thanklessly declined.

Let us get the right view of life. We cannot tell all we are doing. Now our labour looks poor, shallow, commonplace: we know not what it is, what apocalypses it is working up, and what may come out of it. To the least of us, the smallest, God has given wings, and wings are as the beginning of immeasurable capacity and power.

We know not what is happening around us. What is yonder man doing in the field? He is a king's son, and himself looks a king, every inch. Is he amusing himself? Alone he stands there, and is drawing a bow and shooting arrows, and a lad far off is engaged to bring them back that he may shoot them again. Ask the boy what the king's son is doing: he says the king's son is amusing himself, is taking exercise, is preparing by this rehearsal for some larger feat of archery. But hidden somewhere in the field is one who is reading that primitive telegraph with another eye. What was amusement, what was archery to the young watcher, was life or death to David. Who can tell what signs are being written in the air? Who knows what shocks may be conveyed by the uplifting of a hand in signal? Beware the men who make life little and small and dull, and who say it is all froth and foam, and that you can see every whit of it. We really see next to nothing—the angels are hidden—no man hath seen God at any time.

We have corresponding instances in life. Every man is a living personal commentary upon these truths. He says he has been saved when all his most loving friends had given him up. He has seen sights that cannot be accounted for by mere verbal criticism. He says that there is a secret about him, and he cannot tell its name.

Who is that boy sitting on the steps there? He has a hat on that was made for any head but his own; and his coat, who made it? His mother, very likely—rough spun, not too well fitting. What is he waiting for? To get the job of sweeping the steps he sits on? Perhaps. Years pass by and a portly man comes down those steps. Broad his face, a great round shining blessing, kindness in his eye, power in the uplifting of his hand. Who is he? That is the boy, grown now fully, physically, intellectually and socially. The boy and the man are both Horace Greeley, an editorial prince, a man whose writings no one among his countrymen can afford to decline to read. "I girded thee, I brought thee to those steps, I set thee down upon them, I appointed an angel to watch thee all the time: it was my way of nursing and caring for thee, and training thee." He bringeth the blind by a way that they know not,



See that poor little lad, climbing that ladder. The ladder is forty feet high. Suddenly he falls from the top of it. Is he dead? No, but deaf. Not rather hard of hearing, but deaf. The thunder passès over him and he hears it not, and the wind in its most staccato tone fails to touch the organ of his hearing—for ever in this world deaf. And see that kind-looking man who is looking at him, inquiring about him, who offers him books and a little help. That man is an angel of God though he knew it not, and the lad will write his name high up on Biblical literature which the Church will never let die. John Kitto the brick-carrier was nobody—John Kitto the Biblical encyclopædist was a great man—nursed roughly but nursed well: and God says to him, “I nursed thee, I surnamed thee, I girded thee, it was all within my scheme; nothing overlaps the ring of the divine movement: it encloses the horizon, and beyond it there is no throb of life. The Lord reigneth.”

He has done just so with some of us, and he is not going to cast us off now. We have sometimes wondered whether we might not be at last allowed to drop. That is the devil's speech: it is a suggestion from below, and not from above. God is not going to allow us to fail at last: he never reckons on building a tower which he cannot finish. Many a half-built tower we have left behind us, but God finishes his buildings right up to the pinnacle. He will not leave us in trouble to sink: all our yesterdays crowded with tender mercies should be regarded as prophecies and pledges that our to-morrows shall be rich with divine benedictions. O that we might live in that faith! Then there would never be a dull tone in our voices again. The enemy gets the better of us now and then, but afterwards we are brought up as from the dead by a mighty act of divine resurrection, and the sum total of our testimony is this—God is good: all things work together for good to them that love God: the Lord will bring forth the judgment of the righteous as the morning, and set him as a child of light above the cloud and fog and storm. The Lord write this faith upon our hearts, make it the faith of our life, and there shall be no more death in all our being.

What is true of the individual is true also of the nation.

England has been girded by a mightier hand than statesmanship or diplomacy. So has the great America, and robust and noble Germany, and brilliant and dashing France, and sunny and tune-ful Italy—whatever the nation, it is part of God's earth and is girded and surnamed by him, and it has a great and beneficent purpose to work out. Nations are not cards with which politicians play at gambling: they may think they do, they may seem to do so, but the Lord reigneth, the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, and he says to the nation as he says to the individual, "The very hairs of thy head are all numbered." Ralph Waldo Emerson has a beautiful little parable about this. He pictures a republican convention: he has in it several very stormy spirits who have undertaken to carry the republic at all costs—mighty little straws hardly strong enough to hold a fly. They have a meeting and storm at one another a long while, and when the meeting is broken up, kind mother Nature, all her stars alight, all her winds quieted down to a touching and pathetic minor, says to the hottest of these conventionalists, "Why art thou so hot, little sir?" The little sir thinks he has been manipulating a nation, settling the affairs of a republic—that without him the republic would be nowhere, and great quiet solemn Alma Mater, every lamp aflame, bends over him, "Why so hot, little sir?" It is the same with this great England of ours. There is a House, in which men point to one another, charge honourable gentlemen opposite—these honourable gentlemen are always opposite—shake their fists almost at the right honourable gentlemen opposite—and kind great Nature waits for them, and when they come out, she says to the fiercest and fussiest of them, "Why so hot, little sir?" The Lord reigneth, the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof: everything is mapped out in his providence and brought within the circle of his decree: he has a purpose to realise, and no man can thwart it. Oh that we were less hot and less fierce, that we had the repose of strength, the quietness of omnipotence!

Here I would repeat an illustration which I may have given before, and which always seems to me vividly to put the subject before my own mind. It is that of the vessel on the sea. Night has come, the passengers have retired to their rest: the wind

blows, the waves surge and splash round the noble ship. The bell tells the hour of the night, and immediately upon the announcement of the hour the man on the watch sings out, "All's well; all's well!" There is a man downstairs sick; there is another man sleepless; there is a child dying; there is a woman in grief; there are some hearts troubled and sad below, and yet the man on the look-out says, "All's well; all's well." He takes the great view, he looks at the sum total, he looks at the vessel—and so it is with the angels and the nations: nations are ships that are being steered over stormy waters and through dark times: many a local trouble, many a keen controversy, many an assault-at-arms, and many a war of words, but the good ship goes on, and the angel reports to the higher watchers, "All's well; all's well." God has hold of the whole, the sum total, and all local disturbances and personal difficulties are gathered up into one great view. If we were to dwell only amid the detail we should be vexed and tormented to death: we must seize the grandeur, the entirety of the situation, and then,

"Above the rest this note shall swell,  
My Jesus hath done all things well."

What is true of the individual and true of the nation is true of the whole earth we call the great globe itself. Truly this earth has been girded though it knew him not. It would seem to be the very Church of the firmament. Can any other world tell such a tale of sin, or sing such a song of salvation? Suppose that every other star is peopled: then what is this tiny earth amid wealth so vast? Why not crush it out of existence, why not sink the small black ship with its blasphemous crew? It would be but a splash—and silence. Yet God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him might not perish, but have everlasting life. Or suppose that the earth is the only peopled star in all the hosts of the firmament: then how great it is, how amazing, that God should have chosen this little spark of light within which to work out the tragedy of sin and the mystery of atonement! Take it from the one point or from the other, the greatness of this earth cannot be disputed. God says to the earth as a whole, "I have girded thee, though thou hast not known me: I have steered thee through the sea of

space, and kept thee from collision and burning, and I sent upon thee the sleep of winter and joy of summer : I found a path for thee in the darkness, I attempered the rays of the sun to suit thy vision : thou art my child-world, thou art the planet of my heart, thou art the star made sacred by the Cross : I will empty thy graves, I will heal thy broken hearts, I will proclaim thee with the trumpets of angels to be the Bethlehem of the skies, the home and the sanctuary of the God that made thee."

Let us beware of the men who would belittle our life and belittle the earth, and deprive us of our inspiration and high purpose. Rather let us take the large view of all things, in every stone see a possible child of Abraham, let every flower give us thoughts too deep for tears, let every act be solemn as a prayer, let every dream hint a revelation, let every deliverance symbolise the mighty redemption of the soul by blood. And let us often think how our life came to be what it is. Saying, "I had but five loaves, but two small fishes, to start with, yet I have never wanted food. I had but a thimble, and the rill of water was very thin and small, yet I have never known the pain of thirst. I was welcomed with but poor hospitality into the world, few prayed for me, few cared—yet I have been preserved, nurtured, trained, established, and prospered abundantly."

What is the interpretation of this? Shall we listen to a man who says, "Luck," "fortune," "chance," haphazard"? Rather listen to the man who says, "By the grace of God thou art what thou art. This is the Lord's doing, and it shall be marvellous in thine eyes." So would we speak to many a Cyrus who does not know what he is doing in life. There are many persons who are called "naturalists," "rationalists," "humanitarians," "heterodox thinkers," "outsiders," "wanderers," "aliens," and the like. No—no. Let us not call them such names with any hint of calumny in the tone : though they are atheists, perhaps they do not mean it. And when we encounter a man who has no faith in God, let us tell him that his denial amounts to nothing as a matter of fact. He has a life to account for, an inspiration to explain, a secret to read—he himself is ghostly, if not a ghost. And which is more likely to be right, the man who says, "It is all nothing," or the

man who says, "There is a meaning in this, deep, pathetic, infinite. We die to live"? The latter speaker has a voice that finds its way into my heart's heart, and that charms my life's life with a very subtle and tender music. Call no man common or unclean. Cyrus, God girded thee, though thou didst not know him. Atheist, God watered thy garden, though thou didst blaspheme his very name. Rationalist, God surnamed and blessed thee in many a crisis of thy life though thou hadst no blessing in return. So would we speak to men, lest they be discouraged and distressed beyond healing.

How glorious the idea that the time will come when the sources of our inspiration will be revealed and we shall know in whose kind and mighty arms we have been clasped and locked. God will reveal himself at last; the anonymous element in life shall one day have its proper name. I have often wondered what it was: I knew that there was an anonymous element in my life, and I tried to give it a name: I called it "Chance," and "Luck," and "Molecular Motion," and "Protoplasm" and "Mystery." I wanted to give it a name—why?—why trouble about it? Aye, why? I called it "unknowable," "unthinkable," "inscrutable." Why did I find these long words for it? Why not say "Psha—vanity—a veering wind: I will never think about it more"? How was it that I could not so emancipate myself from that spiritual presence? I called it by long names, but as my words lengthened my necessity broadened, and I could not take the measure of it by any names of my own dreaming. The boldest guess left me dissatisfied, I felt that I did not touch the grand secret of all things.

One day the answer will come, the riddle will be read, the scattered mist will gather itself up into shape, the shape will brighten into a face, great arms will be stretched out, and we shall know then that all the while God was our Father though we knew it not. We yearn for the day of revelation; oh that it would dawn upon all the earth! Then should the whole world be a church, and space too small for the thunder of our swelling psalm.

## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, it is our joy to know that thou givest power to the faint, and to them that have no might thou dost increase strength; the bruised reed thou wilt not break, smoking flax thou wilt not quench. Thou dost gather the lambs in thine arms and gently lead those that are with young. Thou art patient and gentle beyond all motherliness, and as for thy love, it hath no measure; it is as thy mercy, enduring for ever, and all mankind shall speak of thy goodness when the world is enlightened with thy glory. Thou dost wait for us on the hard road: thou dost not chide us beyond our strength; thou dost tarry and linger long like a good shepherd waiting for the flock that cannot move quickly. This have we known ourselves and it is no mystery to us, for every day thou dost nourish us and cherish us and wait for us and expend upon us the love that redeemed the universe. Thou art so mighty and yet so gentle. The voice of the Lord is powerful: thy voice divideth the flames of fire, and yet it is a still small voice; finding out with infinite tenderness the broken heart, the wounded spirit, the weary pilgrim, and speaking music to those that have no hope. Thy voice indeed is like the voice of many waters: when thou dost speak in thy judgment thou dost make the cedars of Lebanon skip like lambs, yea Lebanon and Sirion like young unicorns. Still thy voice is tender, and gentle—thou dost attemper the wind to the shorn lamb; though thy mighty tones divide all the thickets of Kadesh, yet doth the Lord give strength unto his people and bless his saints with peace. Is it not in thy power alone to give peace? What have we but a truce in the midst of war if we have not thy will wrought in us as it is wrought in thy host above? Thine is an unspeakable peace, a peace which passeth understanding; not as the world giveth dost thou give unto thy children when thou dost breathe upon them the benediction of peace. Great peace have they that love thy law. Oh that we had hearkened unto thy commandments, walked in the ways of thy statutes: then had our peace flowed like a river and our righteousness like the waves of the sea. Thou knowest our frame, thou rememberest that we are dust: thou wilt not suffer us to be tempted above that we are able; with every temptation thou dost make a way of escape. Pity us in our littleness. When our infirmities gather themselves together into a great humiliation and press us down to the dust with infinite distress, then let the Lord's almightiness be our defence and the power of the Lord the sanctuary wherein we rest. We are weary men, we are all tired, we feel outworn, and overdone, the world is too much for our little strength. So we come to thee, the Almighty, for renewal of power, the Allwise for the rekindling of the lamp of our wisdom. Jesus knows what weariness is, and he, great High Priest, is no stranger to pain. He is touched with the feeling of our



infirmities, having been himself in all points tempted like as we are. Jesus of Nazareth, Christ of God, Man wearied with his journey, sitting on Jacob's well—do thou look upon us, a company of weary travellers, sitting here awhile that we may obtain quietness and get our breath again: that we may by the study of thy word and the worship of thy name be better prepared for the discipline of life and for the burdens we have to bear. O come to us—spare us every one—breathe into our needful hearts all the promises that can sustain and inspire, and make the mighty thundering of thy word soft and gentle and tender, lest it break us by its infinite power when thou dost mean to recover our strength and to make us still hope in thee. Amen.

### Chapter l. 4.

“The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary.”

### A WORD TO THE WEARY.

THE power of speaking to the weary is nothing less than a divine gift. As we see the divinity in our gifts shall we be careful of them, thankful for them: every gift seems to enshrine the giver, God. But how extraordinary that this power of speaking to the weary should not be taught in the schools. It is not within the ability of man to teach other men how to speak to the weary-hearted, the wounded in spirit, the sore in the innermost feelings of the being. But can we lay down directions about this and offer suggestions? Probably so, but we do not touch the core of the matter. There is an infinite difference between the scholar and the genius. The scholar is made, the genius is inspired. Information can be imparted, but the true sense, the sense that feels and sees God, is a gift direct from heaven.

It is a common notion that anybody can sing. Why can you sing? Why, because I have been taught. That is your mistake. You can sing mechanically, exactly, properly, with right time, right tune, but really and truly you cannot sing. Here is a man with his music and with the words; he sings every note, pronounces every word, goes through his lesson, finishes his task, and nobody wants to hear him any more. Another man takes up the same music, the same words, and the same hearers exclaim, “Oh that he would go on for ever!” How is that?—the words exactly the same, the notes identical—how? Soul, fire, ever-burning, never consuming, making a bush like a planet,

The great difficulty in all such cases, is the difficulty of transferring to paper a proper or adequate conception of the power of the men who thus sway the human heart. There are some men whose biographies simply belie them, and yet every sentence in the biography is true in the letter; but the biography is little else than a travesty and a caricature, because the power was personal, it was in the face, in the voice, in the presence, in the gait, in the touch—an incommunicable power; the hem of the garment trembled under it, but no biographer could catch it in his scholarly ink.

Very few ministers can enter a sick chamber with any probability of doing real and lasting good. They can read the Bible, and they can pray, and yet, when they have gone, the room seems as if they had never been there. There is no sense of emptiness or desolation. Other men, probably not so much gifted in some other directions will enter the sick room, and there will be a light upon the wall, summer will gleam upon the window-pane, and angels will rustle gently in the air, and it will be a scene of gladness and a vision of triumph. How is that? The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned that I might know how—*how* to speak a word in season to him that is weary. The Lord God hath not only given me a word to say, but he hath given me learning to teach me how to speak it. Place the emphasis upon the *how*, and then you develop all the mystery, all the tender music, all the infinite capacity of manner.

We may say the right word in the wrong tone; we may preach the gospel as if it were a curse. The common notion is that anybody can go into the Sunday-school and teach the young. We sometimes think that it would be well if a great many persons left the Sunday-school all over the world. Teach the young—would God I had that great gift, to break the bread for the children, and to be able to lure and captivate opening minds, and to enter into the spirit of the words—

“Delightful task! to rear the tender thought,  
To teach the young idea how to shoot.”

It requires to be father and mother and sister and nurse and

genius to speak to the young. They may hear you and not care for you : they may understand your words, and be repelled by your spirit. You require the tongue of the learned to know how to speak, and that tongue of the learned is not to be had at school, college, university—it is not included in any curriculum of learning—it is a gift divine, breathing an afflatus, an inspiration—the direct and distinct creation of God, as is the star, the sun. The speaker, then, is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the representative of the Father, the incarnate Deity—he it is who is charged with the subtle learning ; he it is whose lips tremble with the pathos of this ineffable music.

Though the gift itself is divine, we must remember that it is to be exercised seasonably. The text is, “that I should know how to speak a word in season.” There is a time for everything. It is not enough to speak the right word, it must be spoken at the right moment. Who can know when that is ? We cannot be taught. We must feel it, see it hours beyond : nay, must know when to be silent for the whole twenty-four hours and to say, “To-morrow, at such and such a time, we will drop that sentence upon the listening ear.” “The day after to-morrow, he will probably be in circumstances to admit of this communication being delivered with sympathy and effect.” How few persons know the right time—the right time in conversation. Some people are never heard in conversation though they are talking all the time. They talk so unseasonably, they talk when other people are talking ; they cannot wait ; they do not know how to come in along the fine line of silence : they do not understand the German expression “Now an angel has passed,” and they do not quickly enough follow in his wake. Consequently, though chattering much they are saying nothing—though their words be multitudinous, the impression they make is a blank.

I have a ripe seed in my hand. As an agriculturist I am going to sow it. Any labourer in the field can tell me that I should be acting foolishly in sowing it just now. Why ? “It is out of season,” the man says. “There is a time for the doing of that action : I will tell you when the time returns—do it then, and you may expect a profitable result of your labour.”

Then I will change the character and be a nurse, and I will attend to my patient (perhaps I will over attend to him—some patients are killed by over nursing), and I will give the patient this medicine—it is the right medicine. So it is, but you are going to give it at the wrong time, and if you give the medicine at the wrong time, though itself be right, the hour being wrong you will bring suffering upon the patient, and you yourself will be involved in pains and penalties. Thus we touch that very subtle and sensitive line in human life, the line of refined discrimination. You may say “I am sure I told him.” You are right—you did tell him and he did not hear you. You may reply, “I am perfectly confident I delivered the message,—I preached the exact words of the Gospel.” So you did, but you never got the hearing heart, your manner was so unsympathetic, so ungentle, so cruel (not meant to be unconsciously so), that the man never understood it to be a gospel. You spoiled the music in the delivery, in the giving of the message. The Lord God giveth the tongue of the learned, that he to whom it is given may know how to speak—how to speak the right word—how to speak the right word at the right point of time. You want divine teaching in all things, in speech not least.

This is a curious word to find in the Bible. Does the Bible care about weary people? We have next to no sympathy with them. If a man be weary, we give him notice to quit: if he ask us to what place he can retire, we tell him that is his business not ours. Now the tenderness of this Book is one of the most telling, convincing arguments on behalf of its inspiration, and its divine authority. This Book means to help us, wants to help us, it says “I will try to help you, never hinder you: I will wait for you, I will soften the wind into a whisper, I will order the thunder to be silent, I will quiet the raging sea; I will wait upon you at home, in solitude, at midnight, anywhere—fix the place, the time, yourself, and when your heart most needs me I will be most to your heart.” Any book found in den, in gutter, that wants to do this, should be received with respect. The purpose is good: if it fail, it fails in a noble object.

Everywhere in this Book of God we find a supreme wish to

help men. When we most need help the words are sweeter than the honeycomb. When other books are dumb, this Book speaks most sweetly. It is like a star, it shines in the darkness, it waits the going down of the superficial sun of our transient prosperity, and then it breaks upon us as the shadows thicken. This is the real greatness of God : he will not break the bruised reed. Because the reed is bruised, therefore the rude man says he may break it. His argument in brief in this : "If the reed were strong, I should not touch it, but seeing that it is bruised what harm can there be in completing the wound under which it is already suffering? I will even snap it and throw the sundered parts away." That is the reasoning of the rude man—that is the vulgar view of the case. The idea of healing is the idea of a creator. He who creates also heals. Herein we see God's estimate of human nature : if he cared only for the great the splendid, the magnificent, the robust, and the everlasting, then he would indeed be too like ourselves. The greatness of God and the estimate which he places upon human nature are most seen in all these ministrations in reference to the weak and the weary and the young and the feeble and the sad. Made originally in the image of God, man is dear to his Maker, though ever so broken. O poor prodigal soul with the divinity nearly broken out of thee, smashed, bleeding, crushed, all but in hell—while there is a shadow of thee outside perdition, he would heal thee and save thee. Thou art a ruin, but a grand one—the majestic ruin of a majestic edifice, for knowest thou not that thou wast the temple of God?

When we are weary, even in weariness, God sees the possibility of greatness that may yet take place and be developed and supervene in immortality. How do we talk? Thus : "The survival of the fittest." It is amazing with what patience and magnanimity and majestic disregard of circumstances we allow people to die off. When we hear that thousands have perished, we write this epitaph on their white slate tombstones : "The survival of the fittest required the decay of the weakest and the poorest." We pick off the fruit which we think will not come to perfection. The gardener lays his finger and thumb upon the tree, and he says, "This will not come to much"—he wrenches the

poor unpromising piece of fruit off the twig and throws it down as useless. In our march we leave the sick and wounded behind. That is the great little, the majestic insignificant, the human contradiction. We go in for things that are fittest, strongest, most promising, healthy, self-complete, and therein we think we are wise. God says, "Not a lamb must be left out—bring it up: not a sick man must be omitted: not a poor publican sobbing his 'God be merciful to me a sinner' must be omitted from the great host. Bring them all in, sick, weary, wounded, feeble, young, illiterate, poor, insignificant, without name, fame, station, force—all in: gather up the fragments that nothing be lost." Let us go to that Shepherd—he will spare us and love us. When our poor strength gives out, he will not set his cruel heel upon us and kill us, he will gather us in his arms and make the whole flock stand still till he has saved his weakest one.

Did we but know the name for our pain we should call it Sin. What do we need, then, but Christ the Son of God, the Heart of God, the Love of God, he will in very deed give us rest. He will not add to the great weight which bows down our poor strength. He will give us grace, and in his power all our faintness shall be thought of no more. Some of us know how dark it is when the full shadow of our sin falls upon our life, and how all the help of earth and time and man does but mock the pain it cannot reach. Let no man say that Christ will not go so low down as to find one so base and vile as he. Christ is calling for thee; I heard his sweet voice lift itself up in the wild wind and ask whither thou hadst fled, that he might save thee from death and bring thee home. There is no wrath in his face or voice, no sword is swung by his hand as if in cruel joy, saying, "Now at last I have my chance with you." His eyes gleam with love: his voice melts in pity: his words are gospels, every one. Let him but see thee sad for sin, full of grief because of the wrong thou hast done, and he will raise thee out of the deep pit and set thy feet upon the rock.



## Chapter lii. 1.

"Put on thy strength."

### SUPREME ENERGY.

LET us consider the words, "Put on thy strength." Is it a thing we can "put on"? If we are strong, we are strong; if we are weak, we have no strength to "put on." What is the meaning, then, of "Put on thy strength"? Sometimes we say, "Be a man!" The reply is obvious—"How can I be more a man than I am? How can I be less, or other, than a man?" Sometimes we say, "Play the man!"—What else can I play? How remarkably pointless is the exhortation or injunction, "Play the man; be a man; bear it like a man; answer it like a man; put on thy strength"! All these sentences seem to belong to the same level of commonplace speech, and seem, indeed, to be utterly useless and pointless, because nothing else could be done. Yet we all know the meaning of those expressions. There is a meaning within a meaning when we say, "Be your best self." We comprehend the purpose of the exhortation; we are many selves; we are not always in our best mood and force. Men can rouse themselves; they can shake off sleep, or sloth, or reluctance, and can spring forward to a new point, and utter themselves in a more vital tone. You know it; it is a habit of your life. There is no magic in the doctrine: it is current in the thoroughfares of daily life; it only acquires a new accent and a new solemnity when uttered within the enclosure of the soul's prayer. Work for a person whom you dislike, and how slowly the hours go by; how hard everything is to manage; what a weight cunningly, subtly insinuates itself into every burden that has to be borne; how cold in the morning, how hot in the noon-tide; how wearisome towards the time of the lengthening of the shadows! How is that best explained? By your relation to the person for whom you are working. You are only a hireling; you are waiting for wages-time; you will resort to any ruse by

which you can cheat yourself out of the tedium which comes of reluctant labour. Work for a man whom you love, and the day is too short ; there is no weight in the burden ; if you climb a hill you say it is to get a breath of fresh air, and you are glad to ascend the steep. How is it ? Because of your love ; you “ put on your strength ; ” you rise to the occasion ; you enjoy the labour. You say “ Nothing has been given whilst anything remains ungiven, and nothing has been done until the completing stroke has been delivered. You are the same man, and yet how different ! The spirit is not the same. Where there is love what leaping up there is of new strength, what self-surprising revelations of power ! And this is the rule, the holy sovereignty, which Christ acquires over every man that enters his service with an undistracted heart.

Am I too bold in saying that no temporal object is worth the expenditure of our whole strength ? I will not come down upon you oppressively from any great spiritual height, the existence of which you may doubt ; I will work from your own levels, and acquire a right to speak to you by the concessions of your own reason. You yourselves have a law of proportion in life, and you work according to it. But why have any law or proportion ? Simply because all things do not stand on the same level. Do you admit that ? Yes. That is all I want ; with that as an admission I can do all the work that remains to be done. Just the same as I can in all my Christian ministry work from the admissions which outsiders themselves make. For example, Professor Tyndall says, “ There is in the universe a Secret which we cannot make out.” That is all I want granted ; I will not trouble him to concede anything more. And John Stuart Mill says, “ Let rational criticism take from us what it may it cannot take from us the Christ.” That is all I want to have admitted. The whole spiritual universe is in the one concession, and the whole Christian redemption is in the other. So when a man of business says that he does not devote himself with equal strength to all the claims of life, I ask him his reason, and he says that all the claims of life do not stand upon the same line or level, and, therefore, he distributes his strength according to their respective values. I ask no further concession. The Christian thunder is

there! The Christian lightning is there! The pathetic appeal of the Cross is there! Once grant a difference of value and level amongst things temporal and perishing, and the preacher has you within his grip, and you cannot—unless faithless to your own logic—escape the gracious oppression of his benevolent tyranny. Let us see whether this cannot be made out still more clearly. Suppose you, men of business, saw a man of acknowledged capacity and force of mind devoting himself to carving faces upon cherry-stones, what would you say? Suppose you saw a young man unaccustomed to the use of mechanical arrangements and forces attempting to draw a cork by a steam-engine, what would you say, as business men of the world? I will quote from your own book of proverbs: "The game is not worth the candle." What do you mean? If Solomon had said that you would have called it "religious" and avoided it; but you yourselves write it, and I bind you to it. That is the advantage which the Christian teacher has over every other teacher. He can come down and seize all that is true in common thinking and common speech, and give it religious application. You simply mean that the man could be doing something better—that what the man is doing is not worthy of his manhood. You do not wish him to be idle, you wish to call him to an occupation worthy of his capacity and of the signature of power which is written upon his forehead. You are right; the Christian teacher wants nothing more; you are a Christian teacher up to the measure of that wisdom. The Christian preacher has nothing more to say upon that side of the question. When you have rebuked the man for carving faces upon miniature stones, and for drawing corks by steam power, another man rebukes you for writing your name in water; for imagining that God is God; that fame is immortality, and that luxury is peace. It is a cumulative argument, you understood it at the elementary point, and became ardent in the pressure of your conviction, and I ask you to carry out the reasoning to its legitimate and proper issue. Hear me when I preach to myself and say, "O, soul of mine, bethink thee, is it worth while to scratch thy name in the mean dust, over which the beast passes every hour of the day? Is it worthy of thee to beat the air, to cry into vacancy for help that does not exist? Is it worthy of thee to take up empty vessels and try to drink the air they cannot

part with ? I will repent ; I will say, I have been wrong ; I will consider my latter end ; I will take in the whole horizon of this great subject, and from this moment, before the Bridegroom may come, I will have a lamp and a vessel and oil ; and I will wait and watch and labour and pray, and be as one who is conscious of a capacity which might one day despise the stars ; I will ‘put on my strength’ !” Should a man talk so he would not in my opinion be a rhapsodist, but a solid reasoner, and only mistaken for a fanatic because of the ardour of his earnestness.

I may, perhaps, be bolder when I say that spiritual objects alone are worthy of the whole strength of man. Say you, “Other things are to be touched.” Certainly. Say you, “Daily duty must be done in the humblest sphere.” Without any question ; but I am speaking of the focalisation of human powers of the highest nature, and of the consecration of those powers. I am speaking of the application of the supreme energy of the human mind, and, so speaking, I cannot but re-affirm that spiritual objects alone are worthy of all the fire that burns in the bush of the body and enshrines a present and living Divinity. When dealing with spiritual objects and considerations one feels that there is something in them akin to our best nature. There is a mystery of friendship about them ; there is a masonry that is round about the majesty or eternity ; we feel that we are in Fatherland ; the subjects accost us with noble cordiality ; great doors are set wide open before our approach in token of gracious, unlimited hospitality ; portals pillared on solid gold have written above them “Welcome.” Let the mind once become interested in divine studies, entranced and enthralled by spiritual occupation, then to try to withdraw the soul from that absorption would be like seeking to drag from the altar one who is lost in prayer !

Spiritual subjects acquire this mysterious dominion over the soul because they touch every point of life. They do not touch the outside only, or a limited area as our little lights do. Surely one might say without irreverence that few things can have occasioned more—amusement, shall I say?—in upper places than our attempts to make lights. God said, “I will light the

day for you, but there shall be periods of time, Adams and Eves, when you shall make lights for yourselves." His great light we seem to understand as we understand great comforts and great satisfactions. "Now," saith the Lord, "the sun is going down, make yourselves lights." What lights we have made! And how we have advertised them, and made exhibitions of them; and sometimes our lights go out in a moment without giving any notice! If you would know what the sun is, try to make one; try to displace one. So with great spiritual subjects; earthly subjects, or temporal subjects are candle-lights, gas jets, electric experiments; but the spiritual revelation of God's heart is a firmament filled with the gracious light which shines with impartiality upon the pinnacles of a palace and the poor man's one-paned humble dwelling-place. Christian subjects—or spiritual subjects as we have called them—touch every point of life, and touch every point of life without any sense of burdensomeness. Who cannot carry the sun-light? Yet no man can handle the sun. He who wants to see abstract truth wants to see abstract light, and it is impossible. The philosopher will say that it is impossible to see what may be called abstract light, you must see it through atmospheric conditions; but when the Christian man talks about the impossibility of seeing metaphysical, essential, abstract truth, he is mocked and nicknamed and avoided. Our Christian consolation is this: that in spiritual subjects every point of our nature receives the illumination of its capacity and enjoys the rest which belongs to its particular faculty. What a range the Christian thinker has! His library—the universe! his companions—the angels! his destiny—heaven! What a range the Christian preacher has! but he dare not avail himself of it. He could undertake, in the Spirit and grace of God, to outrun every rival if the Church would allow the use of all its resources. It is humbling from one aspect to think how every other institution can in some respects excel the attractiveness of the Church. Do not judge the measure or the influence of spiritual subjects by the space within which the Christian Church has contracted itself. In the Christian Church should be eloquence that makes the theatre an object of utter contempt. In the Church should be prayer which turns the mimic agony of actors into an offence and a blasphemy. In the Church should

be music that leaves all other music behind it, panting in weakness and waving acknowledgment of defeat.

Spiritual subjects admit of a treatment which would put down the things that men now so much long for—not wholly, and not, perhaps, immediately. This thing is not to be done in the twinkling of an eye. This is a question of measurement, calculation, unanimous prayer and hearty deliberation and counsel; but I do contend that he who has in his hand unsearchable riches can outdistance those who have nothing to give but the dust on which the feet tread. Let us have decisive action. I will tell you why—time is short. Let us have decisive action. I tell you why—the enemy is on the alert. He has no holidays, he uses ours; he takes no rest, in his roar there is no break which means weakness. “He seeketh whom he may devour.” Let us have decisive action. I tell you why—the Master is worthy; his name is Jesus Christ; his name is all names of beauty in one sacred, gleaming appellation. He died for us. The love of Christ should constrain us. What say you? Let us be more devoted. The daily duties of life will not be undone but better done. You will change your money more profitably after prayer—not after mimicking prayer—than before. You will write your letters, teach your children, help your friends, give counsel to the embarrassed better, with fuller wisdom and gentler grace, after a mountain walk with Christ than if you had never left the valley. You will not neglect home by attending church; you will bring your home to the church, and take the church to your home; and he would be a man of microscopic eye who could find the line which separates church from home. If we carried out our text we should have a whole manhood for Christ. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all——”: the rest weakens the sentence. Better put the period after “all.” “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all——”: then let imagination fill up what is left behind in the enumeration of detail. Then will come “heart, soul, strength.” With such an oblation offered to heaven there can be nothing left for the service of rival powers.



### Chapter liii.

#### THE PREDICTED SAVIOUR.

WE must be very careful how we allot the prophecies of Scripture and distribute the treasures of divine wisdom. It is comparatively easy to find intermediate occasions and personalities to whom we may confide these ineffable treasures, privileges, and honours. But we must have some regard to proportion, to fitness, and to the spiritual poetry of the occasion. No man known to history, but one, can carry this chapter in all its verses and lines and particles. Here and there some other man may come in and partially appropriate a word, a hint, a suggestion ; but has any man ever seized the whole chapter and said, "That is mine" ? Did any man ever quote the prophecy of Isaiah, saying, The prophet was very bold, and pictured me in words to be found in the fifty-third chapter of his vision ? He would be a bold man who would claim this chapter, saying, It belongs to me, it portrays me, it is an anticipation of my personality and function, my beauty and dignity, my purpose and priesthood. Decency would intervene and say, Do not attempt to wear the constellations, do not attempt to claim the sun as private property ; you will be judged by your claims ; take care that you bring yourself not into folly and contempt by suggesting that all heaven was made for your enjoyment and convenience. Yet there is one Man in history who would fit the occasion, seize it, bind it round his brows as a garland, and it would look in place on such a head ; no one would say, Behold the fool !—who could help exclaiming, Behold the Man ! As a question of poetry this is so, as well as a question of history. It belongs to the poetic imagination to find out affinities and similarities and kinships, subtle and remote, but certain and unchangeable ; and if we might dismiss historical criticism for the moment

we should find a wondrous poetical realisation of this fifty-third chapter in the Son of Mary, the Son of God. There is no reason to reject the historical interpretation. The more it is considered the more appropriate it becomes. But even if for the moment we throw it aside we are constrained to say, The manger, the Cross, the Olivet from which he stepped into heaven, all these combine to find the happy and sacred realisation of the marvellous forecast in this unparalleled vision.

There are some interpretations against which we cannot quote chapter and verse. Yet we know them to be untrue. The indwelling Spirit says, Such and such an interpretation cannot be true. In what, then, is our refuge when such interpretations are pressed upon us? Not in any isolated verse, but in the whole Bible. Sometimes the whole Book is focussed into one quotable text, and that text answers the interpretation that is false and writes upon it its character and its doom. There is a Biblical spirit, a Biblical genius, a sacred ministry of the whole Book. We have seen this so often that we have come to lay down the principle that now no man can forge words in the name of Jesus. Let us hear them: how will they dwell with other words we have received from him? Closet them for the night, and we will open the door in the morning and see which is Dagon, which is Ark,—which is right, which is wrong. If any man said that Jesus Christ had commanded in some book just discovered that men were not to love one another, we know what answer we should return to the discoverer and his book. All this means that there is a spirit in the Bible; not only do we find chapter and verse with which to contest certain positions or affirm others, but the whole Book breathes a spirit which we may utilise in controversy and utilise as a test of orthodoxy and a test of sincerity. It is so pre-eminently in this case. If any man arose to claim this chapter those who are most familiar with the Bible would be the first to resent his pretensions and write their contempt upon the forehead of his imposture; chapter and verse might not be quoted, but the whole spirit of the Bible would be cited. Some things in literature, in poetry, in literary conception and proposition, are impossible; you need not open the credentials, there need be no display of certificate and testimonial

and affidavit : we know by the spirit that certain pretensions and propositions are false ; that they are of the nature of imposture ; they carry their own condemnation. But when we read the life of Jesus Christ, and then read this chapter in the light of that life, every verse flames up into new meanings, every sentence a pinnacle heaven-pointing, every figure a flower grown in the eternal paradise. We might remit the discussion to critics, and release the theologians that they might perform other functions, so evident is the spirit of the chapter, so charged with the very spirit of Bethlehem and Calvary.

There is a tone of discouragement at the beginning which we recognise and approve. That tone is not confined to Christ's ministry alone, but to every ministry subsidiary yet related to the priesthood of the Son of God. Who hath believed truth, who hath believed charity, who hath believed in Gospel virtue ? The truth has always had a hard time in the world. Lies have been feasted, fêted, crowned, and truth, like a mendicant, has had but a crust ;—yet not but a crust ; let us rather say, a crust and a blessing, and in the blessing the feast was realised. "To whom is the arm of the Lord revealed ?" It has been made bare these many centuries, and how few have seen it, or recognised it, or called it by its proper name ! We have had continuity, and succession, and evolution, and development, and progress, and laws of nature ; but not "the arm of the Lord." Men felt themselves more comfortable in talking about law than about the Lord ; it was less pious, less disciplinary, less evangelical. Herein is one proof of the truth of the evangelical doctrine, that it makes men think before they dare utter some of its choicest words.

Does the prophet account for the non-success of this great minister of light, when he describes him as growing up before God as a tender plant, "and as a root out of a dry ground ; he hath no form nor comeliness ; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him" ? Is there in that reading a tone which says, What else could have been expected ? Men do not care for roots out of dry ground ; men do not care for that which is without form and comeliness ; men are charmed by

beauty and are fascinated by excellence that is patent to the eye. What else could have been looked for? Why did he not set the Son of man in the zenith at midday, dismissing the sun's poor light, and for one day glorifying the whole firmament by this radiant personality? That was not the divine method of revelation. Why did he not grow up from the earth as the fairest flower in paradise, making all other flowers tremble, and enclose themselves, and shrink away in conscious inferiority? Then men would have gathered around this flower, ardent as a flame, beautiful as an undiscovered colour let down from heaven, and all the earth would be saved by one vision of beauty. This is not the way; divine Christianity is not an appeal to the eye; it is not an address to the senses; it is a spectre, a spirit, an invisible energy that makes for the heart, and that can only be seen by the vision of the soul. The Lord did not need to wait thousands of years to make a superior Adam with finer tint of flesh, with keener glance, of eye, with subtler and more varied eloquence of tone; it did not take the Potter so long at his wheel to turn out an Adam so mechanically perfect. The second Adam took upon him the form of men. He took upon him the flesh that had no beauty of outline or feature: but now and again how it lightened within, and how the rugged edges of the flesh caught that spiritual radiance and made men turn aside because of the intolerable glory! It was not a beauty of form, it was the beauty of expression. It was not the beauty of statuary, it was the beauty of life. It is the purpose of God to disappoint the senses. He has victimised the eyes, and the ears, and the hands of men. Does he delight in our disappointment? Does he like to see us come to view the marvellous spectacle, and exclaim, How disappointing! Is it by a larger circuit he sweeps round upon our attention and our confidence that he may hold our homage for ever?

There is a conception of suffering in the third verse which no man could have invented! Alas, coming upon it after long familiarity with its weird music, we may not see it to be so. Let us think ourselves back in time and in affairs. The words are these: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." Yet he was to win the world, and

save it, and rule over it. He had not an occasional sorrow, a spasmodic pain, a transient agony; he was "a man of sorrows:" they were multiplied to him; they were his familiar acquaintances; they held night and day counsel together; the sorrows wrought upon him so that there was no place for formal beauty; his face was dug as with an iron instrument, ploughed, scarred; the agony of the heart wrote its story in the melancholy of the face. He came to save the world, yet he was despised and rejected of men, spat upon, buffeted, turned away from the door at midnight, never blessed, never cared for; he came unto his own, and his own received him not; and yet he came from heaven! He was "acquainted with grief"—which we can never be. We have our little griefs, our tiny bubble woes, that rise and burst upon the stream of daily existence; but this Man was "acquainted with grief:" they hailed one another; they understood one another; grim grief nestled in his heart as in a chosen dwelling-place, and he found mysterious consolation through the ministry of grief; he found joy in melancholy; he found heaven on earth; he saw in the black root the possible flower; he was despised and rejected of men—"The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." He would be a bold man who claimed this verse, if he were other than the Son of God. And that any man could have foreseen all this, and invented all this, and made of this supreme woe an effort in blank verse, is impossible to believe. The prophet must have really seen this in some vision-rapture; he must have been present at the outpouring of this contempt, in some high inspiration, in some miracle of introspection and prospection; he must have been enabled to spring across the centuries and spend one day with the Son of man. We have said that some things are impossible: amongst those things we rank the forecast of this deepest misery. All men have their trouble, all men have their touch of grief, all men have their portion of disappointment; but no man can take up these expressions in the fulness of their meaning, and say they are exhausted in human experience.

What is the interpretation? It comes in the fourth verse: "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows."

That "surely" means—Now we see it: there can be but one explanation of all this rejection, contempt, sorrow, and grief: surely, certainly; yes, that is it. The word is not a bare adverb, it is an exclamation of the soul, the outburst of a sublime discovery. Then there comes the correction of an error: "Yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted." That was the common reading of Christ's life. God will not have him. If any prophets would have him they might take him down from the Cross, but not a prophet rose to mitigate his agony. If God would have him for a Son why did he not extract the nails, and heal the wound, and extract the spear, and in throwing it down transfix the murderer who first used it? But God would none of him; he turned away, and in his turning made the heavens black; he expressed satisfaction at the result of the tragedy, and the earth applauded the divine complacency in rocking and earthquake and darkness sympathetic.

Then comes the realisation of the right meaning:—

"But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed" (ver. 5).

What do these words mean? No man can tell. The best explanation of them is to hide them in the heart, brood over them, and use them when the night is darkest and when the great accusing, avenging law insists upon body and soul and all that makes us men. Some sermons are preached in the night-time that cannot be preached in daylight; some expectations are whispered to the soul when no one can overhear. The tragedy of the Cross makes an infinite impression; it dwells within us like a memory that will hardly condescend to accept the embodiment of words; it looks upon us when we are blind with tears; it says something to us when we exclaim, "What shall we do to be saved?" It is not to be mechanically written about, or formally preached, or set forth by dainty choice of dainty words. There is a region where words are useless, where images are hardly available, where choicest metaphor feels itself a trespasser. There are regions which we can only look at, and at whose closed doors we can only wait until it pleaseth the indwelling Spirit to set them ajar a little, that through the hospitable



rent we may hear somewhat of the nature of explanatory or consolatory music. Beware of every attempt to write a book upon Christ's agony. Beware lest in chaptering and sectioning a book, and making in some sort a printer's trick of the story, we should crucify the Son of God afresh. Men see the Cross in its saving aspect probably only once, probably in one flashing moment, but they never forget the spectacle; it recurs when they need it, and that vision leaves the whole life whiter than snow, whiter than wool, creates in the life a hunger and a thirst after things divine and heavenly, and makes the man a new creature, so that heaven's own stars are but baubles after having seen a universe compared with which they are dim specks of colour. All proportions, all distances, all values are changed, changed as in the twinkling of an eye. We are often cursed by our intelligence. We are often impoverished, in a religious sense, by our grammatical cleverness. God is not a God of etymology and syntax; else salvation would be of grammar, not of grace; of clever interpretation, not of absolute, implicit, filial acceptance and obedience. Have we had the vision? Was there a day when all heaven shone with new light, and all earth became transformed with ineffable beauty? Was there a day when we felt love towards all men and could have saved all men that very day, and have brought them into heaven at once—a great missionary experience, a great evangelistic realisation of the value of men? That was the day when the Son of man found that which was lost, and brought it home rejoicing. Never let that day drop out of your memory.

Here is a view of human nature which no man could have invented: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." There is an experimental tone in that declaration. The man knows what he is talking about. It does not become any scribe to incriminate the whole human race without having sure ground under his feet. All history corroborates this criticism; all history sitting in the judgment-seat agrees with this finding. If there is a man who has not gone astray, let him stand up. If there is a man who has never been self-convicted—not within some narrow lines of mechanical observance, but within the great circle of human

sympathy and human duty—let him say so, and let him adduce the proofs, and let him say so in the hearing of those who know his life most intimately ; if he will not say so himself let some sponsor stand up and say it for him ; sound the trumpet of challenge ; call loudly for the witness, and your answer will be—silence.

“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth : he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth ” (ver. 7).

That is our Christ ; that is God’s Son ; that is the Saviour of the world. We know that he was oppressed, and that he was afflicted ; we know that he said, “ My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death ; ” we know that he sweat as it were great drops of blood ; we have read that in history ; we compare the prophecy and the history, and they are one. Isaiah might have been the reporter as he concealed himself within the shadows of Gethsemane.

But the matter does not end here. Providence does not lead to darkness. God has never started on a journey the destination in view being insignificance, blankness, poverty, desolation. On this night a morning will rise : “ He shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied,” or, according to another version, “ because of his agony he shall see and shall be refreshed ; ” he is to have a portion divided with the great ; he is to divide the spoil with the strong ; because he hath poured out his soul unto death ; he is to be throned above the riches of the universe ; he endured the Cross, despising the shame ; he looked beyond to the smiling, welcoming heaven, not as a place of selfish rest, but as a gathering place in which he should hold eternal fellowship with immortal spirits. “ He that goeth forth bearing seed ”—omit the word “ precious,” for it adds nothing to the value of the text, and is properly omitted in the best translations,—“ he that goeth forth bearing seed ”—the epithet is in the substantive ; the substantive is too grand for adjective or term of qualification,—“ He that goeth forth bearing seed ” shall come again, his face all laughter, his voice all song, his arms too small and weak to hold the infinite sheaves. In this

faith we stand, in this prospect we labour. The mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. To-day there is little hope ; to-day there is darkness enough. It would seem as if the multitude had gone out to do evil, and as if fools counted more in number than wise men ; it would seem as if still Jesus Christ was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. But in reality it is not so. It is never so dark, according to the proverb, as before the dawn ; it is then that the darkness is deepest simply because the dawn is nearest. O day of the Lord, come ! O expected light, tip with some foregleaming the hills of darkness ! One ray would make us glad. One glimpse of light would make all thy praying ones spring up from their knees as if their prayers had been answered in a sentence. But our impatience must not rule us ; our impetuosity must be held in check ; our whole aspiration must be content with the words, "Thy will be done on earth, as it is done in heaven." Yet we will say in our daily prayers, "Thy kingdom come,"—as the spring comes and vanishes winter, as the summer comes and explains the vernal breeze and life, as the harvest comes to crown the year's toil and travail with richest colour and richest fruit, with abundance worthy of a king. We live under a great scheme of providence : how dark sometimes ; at other times how bright ! How hard to dig the grave ! How awful to lose the one life we cared for ! How sad to be impoverished at a stroke ! And yet it is in the midst of the desolateness that Christ says he will glorify those who believe in God, he will bring to fulness of honour, yea, even to coronation, those who have clung to God, and those who have clung most tenderly when the night was darkest.

## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, in thee alone do we put our trust. Our whole heart goes out towards thee in eager love. We have committed ourselves unto thee, and thou art able to keep us from falling and to present us faultless before the throne. This gospel have we received from thy Son Jesus Christ. We owe all we are and have that is good to him. His blood cleanseth from all sin. His grace establishes the heart and causes it to grow in all holiness and sacred power. Unto him that loved us, and hath washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; unto him be dominion and majesty evermore. We bless thee for thy house. The tabernacle of God is with men upon the earth. Thou dost keep us in the right way by the declaration of thy testimonies and the continual revelation of thy truth; by the mighty energy of thy Holy Spirit, and by visiting our hearts in times of anxiety and distress. Thy ministry towards us is a ministry of salvation. Thou art always seeking to train us toward thyself. Thou dost lift up our life towards the light, and towards the higher and wider spaces. Thou dost give liberty to the captive—an infinite, a glorious, liberty, requiring eternity for its unfoldment. May we in thy house see thyself. We would look upon thy goodness; we know we cannot bear the lustre of thy glory. Help us to feel thy grace, to hear the still small voice of animation and of comfort, assuring us that the Lord reigneth and that the end of all things is good. We bless thee for all light, truth, peace, hope. These are the great gifts of God. Every day do thou enrich us with them. Then, at the last, we shall not die, but languish into life. This is the gospel of thy Son; this is life, this is immortality, this is heaven. We bless thee that we must die to live, and that living in thy light we can never die. We bless thee for the mystery of love; for the marvel and the miracle of continual grace. Amen.

## Chapter liv.

### GOD'S RELATION TO HIS PEOPLE.

**T**HINK of the prophet making a study of the divine relation to the Church. It will be interesting and profitably exciting to follow him in his definition of that relation. Isaiah sees everything that is spiritual with a poet's eye, everything that is political with a statesman's vision. Everything that is future and bearing upon the destiny and development of the Church he sees with that transfiguring glance which makes all common things uncommon, and raises up of the very stones children unto Abraham. Isaiah will have nothing small, contracted, inadequate

to the occasion. If he spread a feast it shall be on the mountains, and it shall be such a banquet as never man spread before ; if he sing a song it shall be loud as a storm, or soft as a whisper, but such a song as probably never before sought the confidence and fascinated the love of the Church.

According to the prophet the relation of God to his people is a relation that assures enlargement of beneficence on every hand. God and his Church are not locked up together, in some secret place, enjoying spiritual luxuries, whilst all the world is dying of starvation. If we could find such a hint in the Scripture we should burn the book. The Scripture is all for enlargement. The feast cannot be increased ; but if it were needful to increase the space within which the guests are to be accommodated God would thrust back the horizon, rather than any man should starve for want of room to sit down in. If any messenger shall return, saying, "Yet there is room," God would send that messenger out again to compel the hungering and homeless to come that they might enjoy a Father's gracious bounty. So we find in the opening verses of this chapter—enlargement :

"Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations : spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes ; for thou shalt break forth on the right hand and on the left ; and thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles, and make the desolate cities to be inhabited" (vers. 2, 3).

That is jubilee—a great offer of hospitality, a sublime promise of inclusion, the tones of whose hallowed music shall strike the remotest listener and assure him of welcome to the sanctuary and the feast. Any religion that narrows and excludes is a lie. Men should more definitely express themselves about these things that there may be no mistake. God loves the world ; Christ tasted death for every man : "Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely." If anywhere there is an indication of narrowness it is only an indication of intensity, as that it shall be hottest at the centre ; but on account of the very ardour of the heat at the centre shall be the outgoing rays of warmth and light and comfort until the whole circumference shall vibrate as with a palpitation of thankfulness. The Apostle Paul, writing an epistle which has often been supposed to harbour narrowness,

was labouring his very utmost with the help of the Triune God to assure men that God loved the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Yet there are sundry Gentiles who have tied themselves into little knots of favouritism, and excluded both the Jews and everybody else but themselves. They are marplots; they are ignoramuses; what little they know of grammar divests them of ability to understand the spirit. Love cannot be caged with iron; it wants the whole heaven to sing in. But how is this wonderful universality to be secured? How is this enlargement of the tent, and stretching forth of the curtains, and the sparing not of the cords, and the strengthening of the stakes—how is this breaking forth on the right hand and on the left to be secured and realised and turned to the highest advantage? Appearances are against the whole process. That is partially true. But it shall be done:—

“For thy Maker is thine husband; the Lord of hosts is his name; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel; the God of the whole earth shall he be called” (ver. 5).

That is how it is to be done. All these great miracles of love and light and redemption and education are to be wrought by a divine ministry, and not by human mechanism or contrived instrument starting in ignorance and ending in selfishness. All natural and usual law is to be set aside, and God's great miracle is to be brought to fruition amid a wondering silence which shall precede a universal outburst and acclaim, signifying surprise, adoration, and thankfulness. What is this “law” which frightens so many people like an undefined and overpowering shape, rather than figure or presence? Men speak about law as if they understood it: what have we seen about law? How old is the oldest man? We speak with a kind of reverential awe when we point to a man who will soon be ninety. What a marvel! Why, he has not begun to live. What can a man know about law in ninety years, or in ninety centuries? Is there not one law above another? Does not the greater include the less? Are there not horizons beyond horizons? Is not progress but another aspect of recession, by which things run back and increase the space within which our observation is conducted? When we speak of law we speak of one law, one aspect of law, of law modified and conditioned so as to suit our faculties and



capacities ; but when God uses the word law he fills the universe with the thunder of the music. When we have seen all that we can see of revelation and law and order and purpose, we must say with the patriarch, "Lo, these are parts of his way,"—rather, Lo, these are the whisperings of his voice,—“but the thunder of his power who can understand?” God’s power is pledged in the fifth verse—“thy Maker is thine husband.” We have a hundred fathers, ten thousand times ten thousand fathers. We have limited the word husband, the word father, the word mother, as if they had dictionary meanings alone ; we have not seen the overflowing meaning, the over-soul that passes into infinite developments of thought and action and love.

Then the prophet affirms that God’s relation to his people is one which cannot be altered by temporary alienations :—

“For a small moment have I forsaken thee ; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment ; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer” (vers. 7, 8).

How the little moment is lost in the infinite ocean of comfort ! We never saw how small the moment was until we heard how great the fellowship was to be. The moment was a weary one ; it seemed as if that moment would never end. Time is not to be measured by mechanism, but by the feeling of the heart, by unsatisfied desire, by longing, yearning affection that looks but does not see the advent of the life that is longed for. But now we see it in its true setting, it is not a moment, it is a “small moment.” Did language ever achieve a greater feat in delicacy of expression than to reduce any action of time to a “small moment” ? Escaping any microscope that might be supposed to see time—an insect of time. These small moments are the ephemera of existence that you cannot see until they are a million thick on the disc. The little time, the little wrath is driven away by the everlasting kindness. Have you ever seen a straw blown by a storm ? It cannot get rest anywhere. Sometimes it hovers as if it were going to settle down, and presently it is away again, caught by the storm that contemns the homely task of having to blow such an object. So this little wrath, a spasm of anger, a bubble of indignation,—such a bubble have we seen

upon the stream—gone, lost, in the flowing water, and no man can call it up again. Temporary alienations we must have, because of our peculiar constitution and surroundings and temptations. We are in school, or we are at battle, or we are under discipline, or we are face to face with innumerable devils, every one of which is determined upon our destruction and abolition. We may yield a moment, but we shall stand upon our feet again. Sometimes it is needful to be forsaken for the moment that we may be properly gathered. We have seen some loving one teaching a child to walk; the arms were taken away from the child, but not far. The child could never be taught to walk if the arms were round about it; it must be left for a little moment, but the protection must be always near. Alienation does not always mean penalty, it sometimes means education. Alienation may mean penalty, and then the arms are in very deed a long way off,—indeed, they may be lifted up to smite the transgressor, the wanderer whose heart has gone astray, having loved lies and darkness rather than truth. A good many supposed alienations are merely the result of physical causes. If our physical nature were better understood our spiritual depressions would be a great deal less thought of. Many a man suffers from melancholy who supposes that God has forsaken him, simply because he has inherited a constitution that has been vitiated, or because he has tampered with the laws and ordinances of nature, or because he is undergoing a process which may be absolutely necessary for his purification and strengthening. Do not suppose that God is moved by moods and whims as we are, that he favours a child to-day, and rebukes the child to-morrow, without any reason or sense of justice. That may be the way of man, because man is the victim of his own momentary impressions, whims, and desires, but God rules in love, and in infinite wisdom, and he does not merely tempt us for the sake of tempting us; when his temptation does touch our life it is to try it, test it, make room for a larger blessing. Still, there is a backsliding that is to be mourned. “Ye did run well; who did hinder?” Once you were copious in prayer, and now you starve your worship, and contract your petitions within the least possible bounds; once you revelled in spiritual feast, now how capricious is your appetite and how base your criticism! There have been men

who have wandered from the altar, and to all human knowing have never found it again. There are men who have broken their vows ; there are soldiers who have committed high treason ; there are Iscariots who have hanged themselves, and no report has been received concerning them from any world into which they may have plunged. "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." What I say unto one I say unto all, Watch : your adversary the devil goeth about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour : be sober, be vigilant, sleep without sleeping, snatch your rest, but keep your attention on the *qui vive*. You cannot tell when the man who sows tares may steal into the life-field and scatter the fatal seed. There is no time but for vigilance, and highest among the disciplinary virtues stands sobriety.

The prophet grows in rapture as he enlarges his vision and assures the Church that God's relation to it may be relied upon to the uttermost :—

"For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed ; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee " (ver. 10).

Whenever we find in Scripture that the mountains are declared to depart the meaning is that the mountains cannot depart. When Christ says, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away," he means that heaven and earth cannot pass away. To the thinking of that day heaven and earth were the symbols and guarantees of permanence. We should read therefore : For the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed, and the tone should be one of scornful disbelief ; we should say, Sooner shall the mountains depart, sooner shall the hills be removed—absolute impossibilities—than that God's kindness shall depart from us, or the covenant of his peace be removed, if so be we are living in his Son, if so be we date our birth from Calvary, and our regeneration from the miracle wrought within us by the Holy Ghost. So that future is thus secured. When we have seen a mountain walking away from its base we may begin to think that God may alter his covenant. When we see a hill sinking down to the level because it has been standing up long enough and has wholly altered its purpose, then we may begin to tremble about divine promises.

That is the reasoning of the text, and it commends itself to us by its definiteness and by its reasonableness. God cannot write a covenant for the purpose of burning it. God cannot create in order that he may destroy. When he has to destroy, everything that makes him God is for the time being thrown back; he then acts, as it were, partially, not in the fulness of his love, but in the strictness of the spirit of judgment. Judgment is my strange work—my unusual, undesired, unloved work. It must be done. There must be judgment wherever there is love. The spirit of judgment is one of the securities of righteousness and of heaven. At the same time it is perfectly intelligible that God who is love should resort to destruction with infinite reluctance, with invincible desire to escape the unwelcome and disastrous task. But no liberty is to be taken with this promise, "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves," not, let us drop into sleep, let us become indolent and unwatchful, but from the very fact of having promises which amount to inspirations, pledges which are in reality covenants, bearing the sign-manual of the Eternal, let us arise to a higher discipline, and by the energy of the Holy Ghost perfect ourselves that we may become good soldiers, hardy fighters, in life's most strenuous battle.

The prophet assures the Church that she has not yet seen the fulness of her glory :—

"O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires. And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy borders of pleasant stones" (vers. 11, 12).

The time shall come when all that is common or small or worthless or relatively insignificant shall be done away, and the whole creation shall be paved with diamonds. There is a city whose walls are jasper, whose streets are gold. All these indications are to be taken as spiritually suggestive. When we narrow them down to merely literal meanings we miss their purpose altogether. When we hear of harps in heaven we are not to understand what we mean by harps, but to understand music, harmony, joy, delight, rapture, thankfulness. All these symbolic terms are but so many algebraic signs pointing to the unknown, which can only be found out by detailed processes of action, suffering, prayer, and sacrifice.

And then finally the prophet assures us that the relation which God sustains to his Church is not affected by human assault :—

“Behold, I have created the smith that bloweth the coals in the fire, and that bringeth forth an instrument for his work; and I have created the waster to destroy. No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn” (vers. 16, 17).

The idea is that the Church has been saying, Where is that awful man the smith? The Lord says in reply, You see that smith? The Church answers, Yes, too well. The Lord retorts, I made him, I hold him within the bend of my fingers, and one quiver, and there is no more smith to be seen. But the Church says, He is blowing his bellows. The Lord says, I made those bellows. The Church says, See what a fire he is kindling! The Lord says, He got the coals from my mine, and I could shut down that mining shaft so that he could never get another cinder. As for all these little tyrants and enemies and mockers and jibers and sceptics and infidels and others, have no fear of them; if any of them have any sincerity the reward shall not be withheld, and that sincerity may turn by-and-by to intelligence and to faith, but in so far as they mock and sneer and contemn have no fear of them; they are creatures, not creators; the smith is only a mechanic of a low degree or high; he is not divine, he is most human. But, saith the Church, yet there is a weapon formed against me. The Lord says, So there may be, but it has no edge, and it has no handle; and if any man were foolish enough to take it up to strike with, it would curl up in his hand. But, Lord, there are tongues that rise against me in judgment, fluent tongues, yea eloquent tongues, and it is not in my power to answer their wordy arguments or to follow the tortuous train of their reasoning. And the Lord replies, Let them talk; they will soon exhaust their vocabulary. Never interrupt a man who has a bad cause. He trusts to interruption. He thinks the interruption may create for him an opportunity of abandoning the main line of his impeachment. The way to answer a foolish and unjust accuser is to listen to him in silence.

## Chapters lv.-lvii.

### PRECIOUS PROMISES.

**I**N the fifty-fifth chapter we come upon the beginning of many exceeding great and precious promises. However long we may be detained by imagery that is hardly explicable, or by prophecies that appear too remote to be of use to ourselves, we are ever and anon refreshed with doctrines and promises which have a direct reference to our deepest necessities and purest desires. We need more than a grand Bible, as we need more than a high heaven to gaze upon. The heaven which we see would be of little use to us but for the earth which it blesses with its warmth and light : so the grander portions of the Bible might dazzle us by their brilliance or astound us by their mysteries, but we need the sweet promises, the tender words of special grace, medicaments prepared for the heart's disease by the divine Physician. When we are most familiar with the spiritual portions of the Bible we are best prepared to survey within their proper boundaries the portions which lie beyond our verbal exposition. Who would distress himself because of the wildernesses of the earth when he has gardens around him which he can immediately and successfully cultivate ? Who would feel so overpowered by the number and glory of the stars as to fail to light a fire on his own hearthstone or a lamp by which he can illuminate his own house ? Yet it is true that men have so acted in many instances with regard to the Bible. They have been professedly overwhelmed by its majesty, stunned by its ineffable grandeur, and bewildered by the sublimity of its mysteries, so much so that they have neglected its commandments and declined to appropriate its promises and benedictions. It is furthermore noticeable that many of the tenderest words ever spoken by God to man were spoken in Old Testament times. The prophecies of Isaiah abound in tenderest sentiment. We shall now cull



illustrations of this fact, and thus inspire and sustain ourselves by the recollection of the covenants and the oaths by which Almighty God has bound himself to defend and succour his people in all generations. It should always be noticed that God's promises are addressed to human necessity. God does not call upon us first to be strong, and then to be blessed ; he recognises our weakness and offers us strength ; he looks upon all our poverty and loneliness, and proffers us the riches and companionship of heaven. God's ministry, therefore, is always a ministry of condescension. God cannot talk to us as to equals ; his voice must always come from above, and ours must always be the upturned ear and the expectant vision. It is necessity that prays ; it is fulness that sings.

The first promise that we have (lv. 1) is the promise of "waters." A great appeal is addressed to those who are athirst. Thus the Lord accommodates his ministry to human necessity. When men are thirsting for water he does not offer them sublime visions of the future, or stately ideas concerning the economies and dominions of time. He would say to men, Let us, in the first place, supply your need ; until your thirst is quenched your mind cannot be at rest ; until your bodily necessities are supplied your imagination will be unable to exercise itself in high thoughts. The promises of God are addressed to our necessities for more than merely temporary reasons. There is a whole philosophy of government in such appeals. Only at certain points can we profess to understand God, and those points touch our need, our pain, our immediate desire ; when we are quite sure that God gives us water for our bodily thirst we may begin at least to feel that there is a possibility that he may not neglect the more burning thirst of the soul. God approaches the spirit through the body. The God who grows corn for our hunger may also have bread for our spirit's cry of weakness. We cannot estimate the blessing of water because we live in a land that is full of rivers and fountains ; those only who live in desert countries know what it is to suffer from want of water. A gospel in one country may be no gospel in another. It is nothing to those who live in tropical climes to promise them warmth ; but what a promise would that be to many who are shivering in the bitterest cold

It is nothing to the man who can see to promise him the sight of another garden or another orchard; but what would be the promise to see one single flower to the man who was born blind! We are to guard ourselves against the danger of wanting either material things or spiritual revelations which are not of immediate use to us. We want to know more about heaven; we want a literal explanation of the meaning of eternity; we want to see as with the eyes of our body the invisible God; thus we ascend to a level too high for us with our present limited strength and limited vision. We should walk on the highway of the commandments; we should strive after the prize of the Beatitudes. There is work enough for us to do if we would do it with an obedient spirit; and only as we realise that obedience of heart can we hope that the higher heavens will descend upon us, revealing the enlargement and completion of truth so far as we may be able to bear the vision. Let us ask ourselves first, Have we drank of the living water? As for the new wine, that will come in the kingdom that is above. Let us search ourselves with the inquiry whether our souls have eaten abundantly of the bread of heaven; as for the fruits of the tree of life, we must die before we are able to pluck them. We must determine what we want here and now, and he who comes to the Bible with this determination will find what he wants abundantly laid out on the table of the Lord.

Not only is there a promise of water, there is a promise of a higher blessing still. May we not call it the all but ultimate blessing, the all but crowning benediction, forgiveness?

"Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (lv. 6, 7).

The blessings promised in the Scriptures are always more or less conditional. Here, for example, is a condition of time, "while he may be found," and again, "while he is near." What these words mean in all their depth and breadth no man can tell, but he would be a superficial reader who does not detect in them a tone of pressure and of importunate urgency. We cannot tell how long the Lord will tarry at the door, so we should arise at

once and open it. We know not but that in one moment the Lord may separate himself from us by the measure of the whole universe ; we should therefore put out both our hands that we may at least grope after him, and show by that very sign that we are anxious to lay hold upon him. Then again, there are conditions on the part of men : the wicked man is to forsake his way, the unrighteous man is to forsake his thoughts, the sinner is to return unto the Lord, put himself in an attitude of coming back, that is, of coming home. This is the Gospel doctrine of repentance before the time. In the Old Testament we often have the word "return ;" in the New Testament we have the word "repent ;" both words may involve, practically, the same profound and vital meaning, that meaning being that the soul is utterly to change its course, to reverse its purposes, to reconstruct its motive, and to begin a new, a better, and a grander life. Sweet is the promise which follows this return on the part of the sinner—the Lord will have mercy upon him, and our God will abundantly pardon. The last words may be rendered, The Lord will multiply to pardon ; that is, he will not pardon as if with niggardliness or reluctance, but will add pardon to pardon, forgiveness to forgiveness, as wave chases wave over the face of the deep. Lest men should be overwhelmed by this great promise, or should be perplexed by its mystery, and deterred by the very extent of the offer, the Lord proceeds to reason, saying—

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord" (lv. 8).

Thus the Lord will have the working according to his own will ; he will not adopt another level ; he will not accommodate himself to the usual standards of time ; he will set up his mystery amongst the affairs of life as he has set up his tabernacle amongst the dwellings of men. As that tabernacle can never be confused or mistaken for an ordinary dwelling-place, so the mystery of the divine action is to be distinguishable above all philosophies and apart from them, as a new thing in the earth, new because it comes up from eternity, and startles as with sudden light and glory all the dimness of earth's poor twilight. It is as if the Lord should say, Do not hesitate to accept the promise because you cannot understand my action ; do not put away from you

heavenly blessing because you have not earthly explanation ; remember that a divine worker must have divine motives and purposes, and that in proportion to the divinity of the worker is the mystery of his whole action ; receive this by faith, and prove your faith by the outstretching of your hand, that you may claim the pardon which is written in blood and laid upon the altar of the Cross.

The Lord now returns from purely spiritual blessings to give the assurance that he is not only the source of forgiveness but the source of the harvests which enrich and gladden the earth:—

“For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater” (lv. 10).

That is a revelation of nature intended to be a type of a higher revelation still. Everything on earth is made into a ladder by which we may scale higher meanings. The rain is not a self-contained blessing ; it is a type, a symbol, a hint of a larger benediction. The seed which is given to the sower and the bread which is enjoyed by the eater signify more than is conveyed by merely literal meanings ; there is a seed with which the soul is to be sown, and there is a bread on which the spirit is to feed. The Lord makes, however, another and most beautiful application of the imagery, for he applies it to the success of his own word.

“So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth : it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (lv. 11).

So the Lord himself is to reap a great harvest upon the earth, a harvest of living souls, a harvest of redeemed and rejoicing spirits. The rain and the dew may represent the gracious influences which prepare the heart for the reception of the heavenly seed or the word of God. The sower is none other than the Son of man, and the harvest is the Lord's own inheritance. How the Lord rejoices in the prospect of abundant harvesting. Jesus Christ is not satisfied with a small return ; he wills that the whole earth may be brought to accept his dominion and own the righteousness and blessedness of his sceptre. How can God be

ultimately disappointed? How can he who made the world for himself ever turn it over to the dominion of another? When God made man in his own image and likeness, it was that man might enjoy divine companionship and represent divine purposes. How long all this may take in accomplishment none can tell; the years are many to us, and we are weary because of the slowness of their lapse; in our souls we often sigh the question we dare not definitely articulate, saying in our very sighing, O Lord! how long? Canst thou not cut through this flow of weary time and bring in the eternal Sabbath? We have the promise, and we long for its fulfilment; we cannot but believe in its fulfilment because thine own mouth has spoken the holy words. Bless us with thine own patience, or we shall fall into despair, and in our despair we shall blaspheme against thy throne.

The great principle of evolution or progress is constantly affirmed in the Bible. It is notably affirmed in these words:—

“Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree” (lv. 13).

The thorn was useful in its time, and so was the brier, but they shall both be displaced, making way for trees of the Lord's right-hand planting that shall be beautiful and precious in the Lord's sight evermore. We have here the principle upon which God has conducted the world—first that which is natural, afterwards that which is spiritual. God never gives the best first; God cannot indeed give his best; eternity itself will be too short to disclose all the wonders of the divine resources. But here is the principle by which we may measure true progress, and determine whether we are advancing along the right line or not. No man is at liberty to go backwards, to root out a good tree that he may plant a bad one, or a noble tree that he may set in its place an inferior shrub. That is not the way of the Lord. Whenever we are tempted to practise that way we should resist the temptation as leading us to deception and ruin. So here we find a standard by which we can measure spiritual progress. Are our thoughts larger than they used to be? Is our charity more inclusive? Is our faith more hopeful? Is ours only an intellectual confidence, or is it a moral assurance, a pathetic conviction, that in the end



there shall be no wilderness in all the earth, but the whole world shall be a garden beautiful with flowers of heaven? Do we take a more hopeful view of the condition of the human family? Are we less carried about by every wind of doctrine than we used to be? All these questions, apparently so simple, are inquiries that penetrate the very core of our life, and should therefore elicit from us the frankest and completest replies. The Church should find in this assurance a standard by which to determine its own progress in the world. Do men recognise the increasing beauty of the Church, and especially its increasing utility? Is the Church a mere thorn or a mere brier? or is it as a fir tree and a myrtle tree, an advance upon the past age, a sure sign of progress in value and utility? The Lord will claim such advancement as a proof of his own rule and authority, for the new trees "shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."

The Lord promises honour to obedience.

"For thus saith the Lord unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant; even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off" (lvi. 4, 5).

It is supposed by the most competent annotators that the customs of Eastern temples and of later synagogues suggest that these words may refer primarily to the memorial tablets which were put up in such places in commemoration of distinguished benefactors. We see in such words the decay of exclusiveness and the incoming of true catholicity of faith and love. Again and again the Lord says "will I give," and "I will give." He is always giving; he lives to give. God so loved the world that he gave; his hands are outstretched in continual dispensation of blessing. Observe here the usual condition upon which great honours are promised—to them "that keep my Sabbaths," to them that "choose the things that please me," and to them that "take hold of my covenant." This is not an indiscriminate rain of benediction, clouds emptying themselves without regard to character; it is not a confusion of man with man; but there is a principle of discrimination, election, selection, or choice, running through the



whole action. When we come upon the word "sabbaths" and upon the word "covenant" in the fourth verse, we come upon terms that can be tested by history, we come upon a species of institutionalism whose outlines are clearly marked in the ancient Scriptures; but there is an expression in the fourth verse which is larger, namely, "the things that please me." There will gradually arise in the soul a verifying faculty, a spirit akin to God's own, so that we shall know what will be well-pleasing in God's estimation, and what will be displeasing, without any attempt to particularise or classify the actions of life. When a man wishes to know what things will please God he can have no difficulty about it. He must not begin at the point of mystery, he must begin at the point of revelation. God has been condescending enough to indicate in explicit words some of the things that please him; from these we can advance to others; we can enlarge the theatre of operation, and we can discover for ourselves, by the aid of the Holy Ghost, the things that will give God the highest delight. So there is a sphere bounded by commandment, and there is also a sphere opened up by the imagination, the religious imagination, that wondrous power by which we conduct processes of selection and establish laws and actions of affinity, so that no mistake is made by the soul that lives to please its Creator.

Some men have had this testimony, that they pleased God, that is to say, God looked upon them and derived pleasure from his survey, so simple was the motive, so candid the action, so beneficent the spirit, that he saw in the advancing saint a type and symbol of his own holiness. God promises permanence of blessing. The men who please him are to have a place in his house, and within his walls they are to have a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters; none shall take them out of the place to which God assigns them; they shall dwell in an inviolable temple; their home shall be a sacred sanctuary, where the angels come whose windows open upon eternal spheres, and from whose elevation can be heard supernal music. Thus blessing upon blessing is given to earnest souls, as if God could never give enough; it is we who must declare our vessels are exhausted, for God's great benefactions can know no end.

Chapter fifty-seven opens with a most gracious and precious promise :—

“The righteous perisheth, and no man layeth it to heart : and merciful men are taken away, none considering that the righteous is taken away from the evil to come. He shall enter into peace : they shall rest in their beds, each one walking in his uprightness” (lvii. 1, 2).

The words may have been written in presence of the actual persecution inaugurated by Manasseh. The writer may have seen one prophet after another cruelly destroyed. Several prophets have vexed their souls even to death on account of the evils by which they were surrounded and overwhelmed. It was given to the prophet to see, even in the removal of the righteous, a deliverance from a fate unrelieved by a single gleam of light. If in this life only we had hope we should be of all men most miserable. Unless we interpret the littleness of time by the greatness of eternity we should be overwhelmed by daily distress. “Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory : while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen : for the things which are seen are temporal ; but the things which are not seen are eternal.” The world is never to be looked at in its solitariness, as if it were one world only, a poor unrelated wanderer in the infinite spaces. Time has a relation to eternity, earth to heaven, the present to the future ; and unless we grasp all the elements that are involved in the unity of life, we shall continually be distracted and our spirits will be darkened by despair. When the good man dies we should say, he has escaped the evil of life ; when the merciful man dies we should say, he has entered into peace. The “bed” referred to in the second verse is the grave. The Christian does not terminate his thought by the grave, for he lives in the light of a larger and nobler revelation. The grave is no longer a bed, a final resting-place ; it is but a point to halt at ; the spirit has gone beyond the boundaries of the tomb, and is already rejoicing in the dewy morning of eternal day. Thus we are lifted up in contemplation, thus we are strengthened in faith, thus we are ennobled in all intellectual thought, by coming into contact with the spirit and revelation of Jesus Christ. The grave is no longer a boundary line ; it is but a transient shadow soon to be driven

away by the rising light. Beyond it lies the garden of the Lord; one inch beyond, and all heaven glows in infinite summer.

We next come upon the greatest spiritual promises that can be offered to the souls of men. We see those promises the more clearly by reason of the contrast in which God the Giver and Author of these promises establishes himself. Thus—

“For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones” (lvii. 15).

Thus eternity is employed for the purpose of dignifying time, and thus God's loftiness is used to ennoble his condescension and to give point and effect to the sweet words of his grace. Never do we find God merely sublime, ineffable, and incomprehensible: that aspect of his nature we must of course never lose sight of, but at the same time we must not lose sight of the other aspect, which represents him as dwelling with the man that is of a contrite and humble spirit, that he may revive the spirit of the humble and revive the heart of the contrite ones. The infinitely great One cares even for the infinitely little. It is eternity that stoops down to nurse time, as a child or an infant might be nursed in the arms of strength and succour. The imagination delights in picturing visions remarkable for sublimity; but the imagination of the heart, which is the best of all religious faculties, pictures God as shepherd, father, friend, yea, mother and nurse; for grammar as to mere gender goes for nothing when the heart, so to say, riots and delights in the appropriation of the tenderness and nearness of the living God. God says he will not contend for ever, neither will he always be wrath; thus he puts a period to anger, but he never puts a period to mercy, to love. God is not anger, but God is love. If he could terminate his love he would terminate himself. His anger is but for a moment, his mercy endureth for ever; he smites in great wrath, but his sword is not always in his hands; he observes man in contrition and penitence, and then he says: “I have seen his ways, and will heal him: I will lead him also, and restore comforts unto him and to his mourners.”

The fifty-seventh chapter ends with a declaration which shows that amid all the goodness and graciousness of the divine way the standard of righteousness is never lowered, never is the dignity of law impaired. Read these awful yet gracious words: "There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked" (ver. 1). If we thought that God was about to lose righteousness in sentiment, we are thus suddenly with a very startling abruptness brought back to the remembrance of the fact that wickedness is infinitely and eternally hateful to God, and that peace and wickedness are mutually destructive terms. The wicked man may create a wilderness and call it peace, but real contentment, benignity, resignation, or harmony, he can never know in wickedness. Herein we find the testimony of the divine presence, the assertion and glory of the divine law. God does not take away peace from the wicked in any arbitrary sense. Wickedness is itself incompatible with peace: the wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. The unrest is actually in the wickedness; the tumult does not come from without, it comes from within; whenever a man touches a forbidden tree, in that day he dies. He may find momentary pleasure in the fruit which he has stolen, but no sooner will he have appropriated that fruit than the very tree itself withers away, and the whole garden is as a blighted landscape. If any man who is out of harmony with God claim to have peace he is a liar, and the truth is not in him. Peace is obtainable in one way only, and that is by the divinely revealed way of repentance, confession, contrition of heart, and unreserved and grateful trust in all the mystery of the priesthood of Christ. Unity with Christ means peace. It does not mean that the peace is superimposed upon a man as a crown might be set upon his head; it means that in his heart there springs up holy harmony with the divine nature, an assurance and consciousness of rest because the whole motion of the life is in movement with the purpose and law of heaven. We cannot buy peace, we cannot sell peace, we cannot lend one another peace; we can only have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

## PRAYER.

WE are fearfully and wonderfully made : truly how great and how little is man : yet thou hast made him in thine image and likeness, thou mighty and loving Maker. Now we are so triumphant, and anon so dejected ; now brighter than any summer day, now more desolate than winter. Thou hast put a song in our mouth, and yet there is sorrow in our heart, which spoils the music. Our life, how changeable ! without consistency ; now sunny, now cloudy ; now on the hill-top, now in the deep valley ; now planting flowers, now digging graves. Vanity of vanities ! surely all is as a veering wind ; there is none abiding, there is only One eternal ; as for men, their breath is in their nostrils, they die whilst they say they live. Yet how wondrous art thou to the children of men, in all care and love, in all pity and redeeming compassion ! Thou dost care for each one ; there is none neglected, there are no orphans ; all men say, Our Father in heaven. This is thy purpose ; if they do not say it now they will say it some day, brighter than any that has yet dawned upon the hills of time ; glad will be that day, brightest of mornings will be that morning. We pray for it, we live in its anticipation, and when men chide us because of our hope we say, the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. We bless thee for what revelation of thee we have seen. Sometimes we look upon thee as righteous and terrible ; at other times as fatherly, approachable, all love, always welcoming us to thy smile and protection : but whether we see thee in the one aspect or the other we know that thy way is right, thy purpose is love, and thou wilt, by way of the Cross, bring men to restoration, pardon, sonship. Verily, by way of the Cross ! Other way there is, none ; that way is open ; it is filled with angels of love ; we are continually invited to walk therein and find the dying yet living Christ, the priestly Sacrifice, the Intercessor and the Victim in one. We have seen him of whom Moses and the prophets did write, Jesus of Nazareth, and we have given our whole love to him. Other king shall not reign over us. He is to us Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the All-in-all ; and to him we give our heart, our mind, our soul, our strength, our hand, our whole being : if he will take it we shall thus be enriched evermore. Amen.

## Chapter lvi.

### CALLED TO SANCTIFICATION.

THE Lord says his salvation is near to come, and his righteousness is near to be revealed. The Lord takes no note of what we call time. We are the victims of that illusion. We talk of time as if it were of some importance in regard to God's

movement; whereas a thousand years in God's sight are but as yesterday, and as a watch in the night; a thousand years are as one day, and one day is as a thousand years: the meaning being that we are to drop this sophism of time and dates and arithmetical theology, and betake ourselves to the assured delight that God's salvation is near to come, and God's righteousness is near to be revealed. God is always near, within the limits which he has imposed upon our probation; what may come after those limits none can tell: but whilst we are living God is near, whilst we breathe we may touch him with our prayers, whilst we have any being in relation to the things now about us, we may lay hold mightily upon God, through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and God the Son, and receive all the blessing of God's salvation and righteousness. Herein is that sweet gospel in the Old Testament never excelled by the writers and minstrels of the new covenant: "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near." He is near to those who want him, within touch of those that cry to him on account of their pain and necessity and penitence. How much we lose by imagining that God will come at some uncalculated and immeasurable period, and do wonders in the world! He comes now; he arrives with the dawn, morning by morning. There are those who ask when the Lord will come? He comes to-day: whether he will reign personally and visibly, what matter? He will reign—that is the fact we have to deal with. Why trouble ourselves with accidental circumstances, accessories, transient phases, and possibilities? The question is not, How long will he reign? it is, Will he reign? and to that question there is but one answer—the answer of a triumphant, grateful affirmative.

We have had the historical coming: first that which is natural, afterwards that which is spiritual. I do not look for Jesus Christ in the flesh, I look for Jesus Christ in the spirit, in thought, in elevation of life, in nobleness of soul, in all that is moral, spiritual, sacred. How much we are the victims of our senses: we have the old Thomas spirit: "Except I see the print of the nails; except I thrust my hand into his side." We do not say that, but we say the counterpart of it; we want to see with the eyes of the body, we want to touch with the fingers of the hand, Do we



not hear the sweet voice of the Saviour saying, "Because thou hast seen me thou hast believed : blessed are they who have not seen, and yet have believed"—that is to say, more blessed ; they have a finer faculty, a keener touch, a sensitiveness not of the flesh but of the soul. This body will ruin us if we do not take care. It is a temptation of the devil in many of its aspects and suggestions ; it pines for form, organisation, machinery, visibility ; whereas the soul is being trained towards insight, sympathy, assurance beyond all words, love for which there is no written ritual, the sacrifice of a grateful, loving, adoring soul. Never listen to those teachers who puzzle and perplex you by calculations as to years and centuries and ages ; and to those peculiarly constituted minds, which do not subject themselves to any psychology known to me, that seem to feel the beginning of heaven—at all events an ineffable delight—if they can add up any series of figures into six hundred and sixty-six. I do not want to deprive any soul of its pleasures, but when those pleasures are of a kind that shut out all that is most spiritual, most heavenly, I must lay my hand upon them at least in an arresting attitude. I have nothing to say against six hundred and sixty-six. I am not aware that those figures have ever personally offended me ; I do not want the human mind to consider that salvation or growth, true spiritual progress, lies in that kind of calculation ; but in more prayer, more love, a loftier, brighter hope, and let the Lord open the door when he pleases, and come in any guise or disguise, in any aspect or revelation, that may suit his infinite wisdom.

"Blessed is the man that doeth this, and the son of man that layeth hold on it ; that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and keepeth his hand from doing any evil" (ver. 2).

The Lord will have us, as we are now constituted, begin at some point of obedience. We may not be able to keep the whole law as we should like to do, but if we wish to do it, and faithfully attend to any one point in it, God will see that the blessing is not withheld. Many men can begin at the fourth commandment who cannot begin at the first. The first is an awful, grand commandment ; eternity is hidden in it ; there is nothing in all infinity so far as it is revealed in Scripture that is not included in the true conception and the true worship and service of God. The commandment is ineffably spiritual, transcending all human imagina-

tion, yet evermore appealing to the noblest faculties of the mind to awaken and ascend, and realise divine opportunities. The fourth commandment seems to come within the range of childhood; there we are commanded to honour a day: who does not think of a birthday, or some day full of sacred memory in the family? It may be a day of death, the day on which we said the good-bye that killed us, for "when some friends part, 'tis the survivor dies." Yet there is the fact that days are remembered and honoured; they are days of mourning, or days of sacred melancholy and joy. So the Lord will allow us to begin by honouring a day, not perfunctorily and mechanically, but spiritually, with all the stress and energy of love; so we will call it the Lord's day, the day of rest, the day that represents all time in its divinest aspect and purpose. There are those who say that all days should be sacred,—a philosophy which we accept, if it is not followed by the immorality which neglects to keep any day. We never find that people are peculiarly observant of the Sabbath day who generalise their love over the whole week; and we never find that people are careless during the intervening time who conscientiously, intelligently, and adoringly receive the Sabbath day as a rich gift from God. There are those who say all money is God's, and therefore they never set apart a Lord's account. It is to be feared they may be deluded, and that the Lord may suffer on account of that generality which does not identify itself with peculiar and isolated sacrifice. Let every man examine himself herein. A blessing is pronounced upon those who do God's commandments—not an external blessing. There is all the difference in the world between a reward that is added to a service and a reward that comes up out of the service itself. In the case of religious devotion the blessing is in the service. To serve is to be blessed.

There are those who tell us that even in other pursuits the joy is in the quest. When the sportsman goes forth on his highly mettled steed to pursue the prey he says the enjoyment is in the pursuit, in the swift ride, in the leap, even in the partial danger. We should get a hint from all men, and certainly those who talk thus supply us with the hint that we may be looking for the heaven beyond, instead of expecting the blessing here and now, and yet

always preliminary and symbolical. Why do we not look for the blessing instantly? To pray is to be answered; to enter the sanctuary in a right spirit is to touch the threshold of heaven; to read with a broken heart God's Word is to be in sympathy with the inspiration of God's Spirit. Do not look beyond black rivers and frowning horizons and rolling storms for the blessing, but expect it here and now, and God will not withhold it. Some men seem to be so constituted that they never have any immediate blessing. There are persons so eager, so desperate in energy, that you cannot show them anything that is here; they are always in an attitude of strain and expectancy, thinking that the blessing is over yonder. We who live in large towns have very little gardens, quite little patches of flower-bed. Some visitors call upon us to whom we want to show the garden: the little garden is just outside the house, but when we take such eager friends to see the patch of flower-bed they are over and away as if the garden were two miles off and were then ten miles long. We stop them and say, "This is the garden;" and then they look at it! With what speed they ride across the little grass plot! We should like the garden to be where they think it is, and the size they imagine it to be; but as a matter of fact, it is neither, and it is just here, and we can go all round it in three minutes. Herein is a hint that may be turned to spiritual advantage. The Lord promised an immediate blessing. He does not give us mere promissory notes; it is not three months after date that he will make payment, or six months. He pays along with the work. Heaven is in a rightly used earth: eternity is in a deeply sanctified time: the rest eternal begins in the Sabbath well spent. Expect, receive immediate blessing.

"Neither let the son of the stranger, that hath joined himself to the Lord, speak, saying, The Lord hath utterly separated me from his people" (ver. 3).

You have noticed how full the Bible is of the "stranger." Always the Bible will have a place for the foreigner, the stranger, the visitor, the alien, the heathen; because Jesus Christ is the Son of man, and not a Jew; he shall have the heathen for his inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for a possession: this is the outcome of his divine humanity. No local man could claim such an estate; no Jew could carry that burden of blessing:

only the Son of man, the Son of God, the Saviour of the world can extend his sceptre to the uttermost parts of the earth, claiming all outlying province and district as his own. When the Lord cares for the stranger he begins a philosophy that destroys all our little exclusive and idiotic theologies. Election has never meant exclusion : contrariwise, election rightly understood means inclusion :—because you are elected, go out and seek the man who is outside. If you were elected to this blessing, open the door, proceed to Africa, China, India, Polynesia, and tell the stranger that he need not say he is forgotten ; because the Lord must begin somewhere. Even the Lord's ministry has a point of origin ; but the point of origin is not the point of termination. There are those dear, precious, anonymous persons who suppose for some inscrutable and probably not wholly explicable reason that the Lord has made favourites of them. Never. Your appearance is against you ; your whole soul is a witness against your detestable exclusiveness. When the Lord has called, he has made that call an internal inspiration of love and impulse in the line of evangelisation, missionary work, calling in the heathen, the distant, the outcast, the stranger. Is a soldier elected simply to wear his uniform ? When he is made a soldier he ought to be a warrior waiting only for an opportunity to defend his country from assault. When a boy is made a scholar, is it that he may keep his scholarship to himself and enjoy in quiet contemplation all classical wealth, all the treasures of ancient and modern history ? Certainly not. He was taught that he might teach ; he was instructed that ignorance might not live in his presence ; it was that he should break the bread of his knowledge to those who stood in need of information and guiding intelligence ; so when a man is called into the Church of Christ, it is that he may bring some other man in, the stranger and the far-away soul.

This prophecy also teaches that deprivation has never meant joylessness. The man referred to is a childless man, yet he is to have his gratification and his particular delight. Some men are moneyless, but they are not therefore poor ; some men are friendless within social limitations, but they are not therefore alone. Hear the voice of One who expresses this in pathetic

tones : "I am alone, yet not alone, for the Father is with me." Hear another, farther away down the corridors of history, saying, "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up, and there shall be a fuller affection in his embrace because of my very orphanage." Always look at the higher and brighter aspect of life. The child has no father, and yet he cannot be deprived of fatherhood if his young heart looks up into heaven to seek for the only Father. He who bears the name of father bears it as a borrower ; it is not an original trust, it is not an invention of any man ; it is part of God's appellation, it is a divine signature. When, therefore, you say, "We are without children, we are without money, without friends, without father and mother," you are on the wrong key altogether ; there is no religion in that down-going gamut ; the religion is in the ascending scale. Consider what we have in reality ; never speak of deprivation except as an introduction to the grateful statement that we have more than we deserve, and if God has denied us blessings in one direction, he has multiplied them to abundance in another.

"Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer" (ver. 7). The Lord will have a mountain on his landscape. There are those who do not know a mountain when they see it ; they think it is something that ought to be there and has always been there, but what it is they do not know ; the poorest imbeciles in the world are to be found in Alpine valleys. The Lord will have his saints be mountaineers ; when he has a feast it shall be on the top of the mountains ; it is characteristic of his majesty, it is typical of his hospitality, it is charged with suggestions of nobleness and grandeur. Have we ever lived the mountain life ? Have we ever left the hedgerows and begun really to climb ? To climb is to be blessed. The blessing begins long before you get to the top ; walking is recreation ; exercise is recruit. If we cannot do other than dwell in the valley, the Lord will accommodate himself to us ; but he calls us to the mountain : "Come unto the mountain early in the morning, and I will speak to thee." What sublimer picture is there in ancient history than Moses going with a friend or two up the mountain, and then at

a certain time saying, Stop here : I must go the rest alone ? Watch him as he climbs the great stony steep. What helps that old young man to climb as he is doing ? There is youth in his limbs, yet there is old age in his bent shoulders. Why climbs he so high ? He has an appointment with his Lord. And why did Jesus Christ go into the mountain ? That he might see God. Why did the Saviour, God the Son, seek the solitude of midnight ? That he might be least alone. When he was most alone he was least alone ; for when the toiling, tumultuous, riotous multitude left him the air palpitated, vibrated with the presence of blessed angels. Let us ascend the mountain : it signifies elevation, communion, universality. Have a mountain on your religious landscape.

“The Lord God which gathereth the outcasts of Israel” (ver. 8). He will not merely gather, he will gather the outcasts ; more and more he will gather besides those. He says, I have more to come ; “Yet will I gather others to him, beside those that are gathered unto him.” If there is one man not saved, O ye missionaries, explorers, up ! flee !—the man may die before you seize him. Will the Lord receive another outcast ? He will. “I,” says one, “am the vilest of the men that live : will he receive me ?” Yes. “When will he receive me ?” Now. Thus we have in the Old Testament the very spirit of the New. Christianity is nothing if it be not a missionary religion. The Cross has no meaning if it were merely a Roman gallows. The Cross is more than wood ; above the superscription of Pilate is written with the finger of God, “Herein is love, that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” That, O man of God, is your subject. It includes all fields and topics that are good, all benevolence, charity, philanthropy, activity of a reformatory and ameliorative kind. The Cross of Christ is the largest subject that ever appealed to the understanding, the conscience, and the imagination of mankind.



## Chapter lxiv. 1.

"Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down."

### THE HEART'S CRY.

THE heart must have its time for speech as well as the cold and foolish intellect. The intellect is always a fool when it is not held in check by the heart, in the consideration of all pious, moral, and beneficent questions. There are many persons who are much afraid of changing the solar system. They tell us that when we pray to God to give us a fine day we ask God to change for the time being the whole construction of the solar system; and some persons can never endure that. They are fond of the solar system; it is to them more than God; they worship the solar system, and all the more so that they know nothing about it, having only seen one little speck of it, and only the outside of that little speck. Here is a man, come whither he may, who rises above the whole solar system, and would have it torn to pieces rather than be without God. That man is right. We say "man," although literally it may be the petition of the Church; yet we take Isaiah as the typical prophet in this instance, and the cry is—Never mind what becomes of the solar system, we want thyself, thou God and King and Father of men. Melt the mountains, break up the mechanism of the universe, only come to thy children, and take up thy habitation in our hearts, and let us see thee, and feel thee, that we may love thee more deeply and completely. That is musical. The other person is very anxious not to touch the umbrella which he calls the solar system; that must always be hung out and held up properly; but, passion, heart, frenzied love, says, I must have God, come what may of the solar system, and all the stellar constitution of that blue dome. That man speaks the deeper language, his is the grander eloquence;

the other man is a little mechanic and expert in one thing out of millions of things, and because he does not know the remaining millions he does not really know the one thing which he has undertaken to handle; only he knows what a pebble is who knows what God is. You will be ruined by your specimens and museums and collections, because they amount to nothing, until they are related to the currents of the universe.

There are persons who are very anxious not to suspend the laws of nature. They therefore cannot believe in miracles; they are the victims of the expression "the laws of nature." What is nature? What is law? What are the laws of nature? How do they begin, how do they run, how do they eventuate, for what purpose were they established? What are these tyrants that even God cannot modify, alter, or discharge as if with sovereign contempt? It is very interesting to hear persons who have never been farther than their own back garden discourse upon the sublimities of all the zones of the globe: how fluent they are! When did ignorance stand still for want of a word? Wisdom often stands still, the highest eloquence often hesitates; it is dainty in its elections, it is discriminating, penetrating; it cannot be taken in by shades that graduate into one another, it must be precise, definite, emphatic. So it is always interesting to hear persons who have made a collection of a basket of flowers or butterflies talk about the laws of nature. Here is a voice, resonant, magnificent, full of heart-chords, that says, Break up the scheme of nature and rebuild it, only thou Heart of things come to us! We catch our best selves in our best reality when we are thus impassioned. The zoologist or physiologist tells us that animals can only move when they are warm; they can only move in proportion as the sun is in them. It is the sun that makes the bird fly, it is the sun that made the little serpent leap up into your way and flash into the woods like a glare of light in darkness. We move by the sun. So, in a higher sense, in the larger, richer realms of education and culture and growth, we are moved by inspiration, not by information. Information is a liar, either intentional or unconscious. It never tells a whole story. Inspiration stands clear out above all the details, and, seizing the universe in the gross, speaks the purpose of its divine Creator. You do

not know yourselves until you are drowned in tears, or roused into enthusiasm; you do not know your own patriotism until in the presence of some crying wrong you rise into a new and nobler consciousness. So we must come to inspiration, to highest poetry, to divinest touch, such as we find in this Christianity, that we may know what can be done in the imagination of faith, even to the solar system and to the laws of nature. The man who talks coldly to you cares nothing about you. While he is looking at you he is looking into you, and while he is apparently interested in you he is adding you all up to see what he can make of you in the end, or he is wishing you were a mile off. The man whose heart is ablaze with divine fire, and who looks at everything through his tears, and throws upon all commonest things the glamour of a chastened and purified imagination, is the man who would do more for you than the man who is a self-constituted constable or a self-appointed sentinel, whose business it is to take care of the solar system. When you have caught yourselves in religious rapture you have seen an image of yourselves that would remind you that man was made in the image and likeness of God.

There are two ways of looking at a flower: the one is a botanical way, or, to use the general expression, the scientific way; the other is the poetical or spiritual way. The botanist takes the flower to pieces because, he says, he loves it. To the lay mind that seems to be a curious way of showing love, but scientifically we are bound to believe it is quite correct. He takes the flower all to pieces and calls it a stem, and petal, and cell, and leaf, and so on. The poet says, Do not touch it; if you touch it you will take the bloom off the fair thing, an almost angel. Walk around it, fix your eyes upon it, love it, let it talk to you. They are both right. We could not do without either the one interpretation or the other. We ask the poet why these flowers are red, and those are blue, and others are tinged with other hues, and he says, To please the eye of man. We turn to the botanist and say, Is that true? and he says, Not a word of it. The flowers are red and blue and other colours of a vivid kind in order to attract the insect; however these flowers came into being, there was not the faintest intention of pleasing the

eye of man with their colours; they are not fashion-plates, they are not printed in order to entertain foolish sightseers; the flowers are made vivid that the insects may see them, come to them, and fertilise them, and take away something out of them and carry it to some other flowers. Wherever the wind fertilises a plant it leaves it of a dull colour. The wind does not fertilise your fine reds and your tender blues; these are the mission field of insects. Whatever the wind does, it never leaves a patch of colour upon anything; it simply blows upon it and goes away, leaving it dull, unpainted, unflushed with poetic blood. The botanist may be right from a botanical point of view; but what is a botanical point of view? Who would pay for it, or go a long way on a wet day to seek it? Who would die for it? There may be some botanists who would die for their plants. I do not know them, and therefore I will neither affirm nor deny their existence; but the poet must have his flower, his garden, his paradise; yea, it he be a great man in a little house and have all his garden on the window-sill, yet through that little garden he will see all the flowers that ever bloomed in the parterres of the unmeasured universe.

So with the solar system, and the laws of nature. There is a scientific view, cold, exact, precise, ignorant, fluent, and characterised by every other element that can be contributed either by partial wisdom or absolute ignorance; and there is a poetical view of things, the view that is disclosing itself to imagination's tender expectant eye; the view that looms on dreams. There is the hard stern doctrine that says God is shut up in his own universe, and he cannot get either under it or above it or round about it; he has enclosed himself in that magnificent cage, and there he must stop. There is another view that says, "Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, oh that the mountains might flow down at thy presence!" The world would die but for this second and nobler view. There are occasions when the heart expects great things from God, and insists upon having them. These are moments of inspiration; the heart says, I know that God can do this, and I will give him no peace until it be done; I will importune him, I will besiege his throne, I will smite the gate of heaven violently, I will give no rest to my eyes or my eyelids until this

consummation of righteousness and truth and love take place. Let the wild heart pray; let such holy excitement work out its impassioned enthusiasm. To the cold, unexpanded mind it may seem to be ecstatic, romantic, and fantastic, but God alone, who made the soul, can interpret and appreciate all its varying moods and passions. To him remit the great arbitrament.

The heart knows what God can do, and the intellect does not. Be very jealous of your intellect, especially if you have been tempted to believe that you have one. The intellect is vain, conceited, self-idolatrous, fond of invention, pleased with its own discoveries, overjoyed with little toys of its own making and preservation. It was through the intellect that the devil wrought all his mischief; he made no appeal to the heart, he said, God said you may not eat of every tree of the garden; if you were to eat of the tree that is forbidden you would be—what?—wise, intellectual. Not a word was addressed to the region of the soul in which lie all the holy elements of obedience, love, loyalty, trust, expectancy of fellowship and communion with the divine heart. You know what it is to be importuned by the head on the one side and the heart on the other. The heart will go farther than the head; the head will sometimes say, Now I am nearly exhausted, and I must lie down. The heart never gives in. The heart says, We will find him over the next sea. The intellect says, I cannot go upon any more seas. The heart says, Then I will go alone. The heart never tires; the heart says, There is yet more to be seen than we have beheld, I will sit up all night; go, thou laggard intellect, and lie down and rest thee, and talk thy nightmare; I will spend all the darkness in seeking some new star. The heart is the last to give up; it cannot relinquish its quest, when it is once self-assured that God may at any moment appear with deliverance and redemption and sanctification. Believe the heart; follow your best impulses; do not be chaffed out of your piety by being called fantastic, romantic, enthusiastic. They are bad men who know the measure of God and the measure of piety, and who carry about their religion as they would carry about an outer garment. Your religion is not to be outside of you, an imposition to be carried either by head or heart; it is to be part of yourself, wrought into the very tissue

of the soul, so that you shall live and move and have your being in God : a marvellous, but under the mighty energy of the Holy Ghost a quite possible, absorption.

We have often had occasion to remark, in going through this PEOPLE'S BIBLE, that close communion with God, real fellowship with the heart of things, reduces nature to very small dimensions. In proportion as we are out of God nature appears to us to be simply infinite. We have to get rid of that fallacy before we can begin to pray. You must see, as science teaches us, that the greatest comet that ever alarmed the nations could be put into a thimble. You must overget the imposing hypocrisy of nature. In proportion as men grow in grace they rise above nature, they dominate nature, they look down upon it. Travelling up to God, inquiring for God, they wonder and say, "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained ; what is man, that thou art mindful of him ? and the son of man, that thou visitest him ?" but when they get really into sympathy with God as revealed in Christ, even a fisherman can say, "The heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat." In proportion as we rise into the higher poetry, we dismiss "the cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself," and say that they shall be dissolved, and like the baseless fabric of a vision, "leave not a rack behind." When you find a man who is frightened by nature, and feels that he has a whole solar system to carry somewhere, you find a man who has not begun really to say, "Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." The man who says that looks upon nature, so far as magnitude, pomp, majesty are concerned, with contempt. He who has seen the king and who loves the king cares next to nothing for the chariot in which he rides. When we have seen God with our hearts and felt his power and answered the appeals of his love, we say, Come down to us, though thou dissolve the solar system and melt the mountains that affright us by their shadows ; come through the nature thou hast made, and claim our poor hearts as thy dwelling-place.

Do not think that God has built himself out of his own universe.



Curious notions prevail respecting God in this matter. The general conception of theological ignorance seems to be that God has pinioned himself hand and foot, and that he calls the pinions he has created and applied "the laws of nature." The Christian conception is that God is greater than all. The Lord reigneth; he is King; the Most High hath his way in the heavens and in the great deep and to the ends of the earth; the morning is his gospel, the night is his benediction, and all the rolling seasons are revelations of his characteristics, and he can do what he will among the armies of heaven and among the children of men. He taketh up the isles as a very little thing; he weigheth the mountains in scales, and smiles at their so-called magnitude; and as for the great blue highway of the stars which we call the sky, it is a multiplied film, a bubble that he can blow into nothingness. Always avoid those people who are anxious to take care of the solar system. They are wondrously concerned about its system, and they would not for the world pray for a fine day because the solar system, as we have said, would have to be reconstructed if they got a fine day to visit their friends in. And they think that God is as much bound by the solar system as they are. What a God is theirs! a godless God, an uncrowned divinity,—a divinity, indeed!—a liar! Oh, rest in the Lord, wait patiently for him, and he shall give thee thine heart's desire. To our present limitation the universe is indeed great, all the stars are points of glory; but when God has fully revealed his Son in us, and has taken us to view things from the right point, we shall see them as he does, and we shall find that God never can have anything above him. How great soever the universe, it is but a footstool.

## “HANDFULS OF PURPOSE,” FOR ALL GLEANERS.

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*“A garden that hath no water.”—*  
ISA. i. 30.

How wonderfully the powers of nature co-operate! How wonderfully, too, things that are far separated from one another have a mutual influence! Yet the influence is not always mutual; sometimes it is entirely on one side. The garden has no effect upon the clouds, but the clouds have a wonderful effect upon the garden. What would the garden be without rain? Soon it would be but so much dry and fruitless dust. It is united in its substance and made productive in its influence by the sun, the rain, and the living air. These do for the garden what the Spirit of the Lord did for man when he was made out of the dust of the ground. They breathe into the garden the breath of life, they redeem the ground from desolation and turn it into a garden of beauty. How often we see in character the exact counterpart of this picture! A man may have many qualities which are totally useless for beneficent purposes on account of the baseness of some one agent or influence. The garden, for example, may be large, and may be laid out with picturesque effect as to its outlines; the paths may be broad, the beds may be shapely, and the whole may be complete as a picture; yet for want of the rain what have we

but fruitlessness and desolation! So it is with character. Men may have great intellectual capacity; but unless they be filled with the spirit of grace their very intellect becomes but an instrument of ignorance itself. Men may have large material resources, but if they never receive the shower of divine blessing those resources will be without fruitfulness in relation to surrounding poverty and pain. We often see a man who is ruined for want of one thing. He has bodily strength, he has great material riches, he has a good social position, yet for want of grace or courage or patience or sympathy the whole estate seems to be lost. The rain itself would do no good if it had not a garden to fall upon. The rain does not make the garden, it only falls upon the soil and puts it into workable conditions. So the very grace of God must have something to fall upon. We must supply the outline, the nominal man, the capacity; and the grace of God working upon these will issue in a great miracle. A rich man who has no sympathy is as a garden that hath no water. An intellectual man without religiousness of feeling is as a garden that hath no water. A well-read man without the disposition to communicate his knowledge is as a garden that hath no water. A family that has no outlying dependants or clients is as a garden that

hath no water. Do not call it a garden ; call it a wilderness. We should seek out the name of the blessing which we most need, and should ply heaven with our prayers until we receive that essential gift : otherwise the best of us will be as a garden that hath no water.

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*"Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils : for wherein is he to be accounted of?"—ISA. ii. 22.*

\*This is in the tone of Old Testament teaching. The prophets and psalmists were continually dwelling upon the frailty of man. By his proved frailty man is ruled out of court as a permanent security or defence. If he never died, or if he were always strong and always wise, then verily he might be accounted of. His mistakes are the convictions which have been proved against him, and he must bear the penalty of those mistakes. There is no man who does not himself need help ; how then can any one man or any number of men be the inviolable sanctuary of all other life ? There is a sense in which every man needs every other man, as a help, as a suggestion, as a temporary refuge. The argument of the text is founded upon the frailty of man. No reference is made to his intellectual ability or his moral sympathy. It is said that man's breath is in his nostrils, and therefore he is little to be accounted of. He does not know how soon he may be gone. In the very midst of his offer of help he himself may be cut down. Frailty has thus its moral uses as well as strength. What is common to humanity should be the teacher of the whole world. There is no man whose breath is not in his nostrils ; there is no man whose time upon the earth is not appointed. In this respect there is nothing invidious in the dispensations of divine providence. From the king upon the throne to the meanest of his

subjects there prevails one law of frailty and incertitude. We are not however to deal wholly with this aspect of frailty. Our very weakness is to turn our attention to the Source of power ; because we are so weak ourselves we ought to ask, Where, then, can strength be found ? Thus our sin drives us to penitence ; our pain drives us to inquiry ; our poverty cries out for the fulness of God. But because we are frail, or, in other words, because our strength is limited, that is no reason why we should deny service to others. In so far as in us lies let us place ourselves at the service of those who need us most. The child must cry out for its mother, the sufferer must pine for the physician. The weak man turns his eyes towards the brother who is stronger than himself. If, however, we seek one another only, we show that the spirit of true religiousness is not within us. We must cry out for the living God, and come early into his courts, and plead to be admitted to his presence ; then our frailty will be supported by his almightiness. We are not made frail that we may be despised ; we are made frail that we may go to the Strong for strength.

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*"The shew of their countenance doth witness against them."—ISA. iii. 9.*

Whatever men live upon shows itself even in the body. Our food becomes in a sense ourselves. If this is true of food for the body it is also true of food for the mind. Men cannot read perniciously and look virtuously. The ideas in which the mind most delights will give figure and colour and meaning to the very face. He who thinks mean thoughts cannot have a noble expression of countenance. He may have largeness and dominance and force, but when the full meaning of the face is searched into

it will be found to be mean, dishonourable, and representative of an ill-treated soul. If this is true of the body and of the intellect, it is pre-eminently true of the spiritual nature. An atheist must have a face as withered as his heart. In mere outline and structure it may not even be without handsomeness; but in all its higher and subtler suggestiveness it is the face of a man who is without God in the world. A man cannot be a drunkard without his drunkenness writing itself upon the face. If a man is a tyrant, the tyranny will express itself in his very eyes. Blessed be God, what is true on one side is true also on the other; so that beneficence of soul is represented by beauty of countenance. The beauty may not be formal or structural; it will be spiritual, subtle, but most evident to those who are most familiar with it. There is great comfort in the thought that everything we do has its outward representation. A neglected house shows itself in the very windows and doors. A neglected child has the word Neglect written broadly all over him. A neglected garden bears its own witness. It is even so with a neglected character. By an unwritten law men know it, and are ashamed of it; they either ignore it or they distrust it. All culture tells. In all labour there is profit; in all industry there is an outcome of strength of character, beauty of countenance, gentleness of tone. Thus we write our biography day by day. Thus we keep our memorandum-book in our very face. Thus we become witnesses either for ourselves or against ourselves. Do not let us dwell exclusively upon either one side of this truth or the other. The way of the Lord is equal. If neglect writes its own condemnation on the face, so culture writes in outward and evident signs its own approval and benediction. We are daily writing judgment either for or against ourselves.

*“They have rewarded evil unto themselves.”—ISA. iii. 9.*

We have often seen that the man who is wicked is not an enemy of some distant or external law only, but is really his own enemy. The bad man cuts his own throat. The man who starves his soul must carry all the evidence, discomfort, and humiliation of such neglect in himself. If we refrain from prayer we shall hurt our own spirits. If we do not give ourselves up to the working of righteousness, another power will arise within us and triumph over our best nature, trampling it in the dust and gradually extinguishing the very image and likeness of God. A wonderful thing is this in the whole process of human education. A truly wonderful thing that the power of suicide runs through the whole economy of life. As a man can put out the eyes of his body, so he can put out the eyes of his soul. We do not injure God only by our unrighteousness, we injure ourselves. That is the very point of the text. What quality we may have lost, what dignity, what influence! Oh that we had hearkened unto the divine law! then had our peace flowed like a river and our righteousness like the waves of the sea. The meaning is that obedience would have rewarded itself in the very enlargement, refinement, and contentment of our own spirits. When a man denies God he denies himself. When a man does not go out into the larger fellowship of the Church that he may make common prayer with his fellows, his own prayers at home are stunted and stifled. Beware of self-deterioration. It lies on the way to suicide. We may not be conscious of having committed spiritual suicide, yet our souls may be lying murdered within us. Do thyself no harm. Take heed unto thyself. Nuture the soul by being good, by doing good, by heavenly

exercise in all the ways of sympathy and benevolence.

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*"The mean man shall be brought down (low)."*—ISA. v. 15.

How is this possible? Is not the mean man brought low already? To be mean is to be low. What then can be the import of the text? The meaning is that there are always lower depths which may be realised. Even the mean man may daily become meaner. There is a reversion to type that is intellectual and spiritual, as well as merely biological. We have never yet realised how truly mean we may become. The way from anger to meanness is more than one step long. Little by little we go down. Easy is the descent of Avernus; easy is the descent from one degree of meanness to another. A man may not all at once cease to give his shilling to the sanctuary; he may divide it, and subdivide it, and bring down the last donation to so fine a point that it is hardly distinguishable between something and nothing. Or, if we put the text in another light, it is still full of significance. Suppose, for example, that a mean man has been exalted to office: he will soon prove by his meanness that he is unworthy of his elevation, and consequently he will be brought down by the common consent of those who know him best. Suppose that a man should not have been known to be mean because of the skill of his hypocrisy; yet in due time his meanness shall be made obvious, and it shall work his ruin. By meanness we are not to understand poverty of external circumstance; we are to understand moral meanness; that servility of soul which is absolutely without dignity; that poverty of intellect which never contemplates the necessity of the value of other men. There is no hope of meanness. There is hope of wicked-

ness, where there is no hope of real negativeness of character. How seldom is meanness pointed out as a great defect or as a reason for disfellowship on the part of those who are themselves honourable. We expel the drunkard, but not the miser. We expel the adulterer, but not the mean man. The fact is that in meanness there may be infinitely more sin than in any single crime against society that can be named. Publish it abroad, speak it loudly, and with unhesitating emphasis, that the law of the Lord is against meanness, and that all the midnight heavens are in eternal warfare against things that are wanting in the quality of pureness and love.

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*"Above it stood the seraphims."*—ISA. vi. 2.

This is the only passage in which the seraphim are mentioned as part of the host of heaven. The primary meaning of seraphim is, the burning ones. A use of the word is made in the Book of Numbers which is alarming, referring as it does to the fiery serpents that stung the people in the wilderness. Notice that these burning ones of the text are in the likeness of men with the addition of wings. A distinction has been drawn between the seraphim that excel in love, and the cherubim that excel in knowledge. But this is of little importance. By cherubim and seraphim I understand symbols of essential life. I understand, indeed, the life of God himself. Notice how many degrees and varieties of life are known to ourselves. Take the meanest insect; then take the noblest man; pass on to angels; from angels ascend to archangels; from archangels rise higher still; and thus at the uppermost summit of the idea of life stand the cherubim and seraphim, the meaning being that God himself is the grandest expression



of life. Concerning the whole universe it may be said, "Above it stood the seraphim." Around the meanest thing that lives they stand, the seraphim. In the estimation of God there is nothing little, nor can there be anything great. Beside eternity all other duration is as nothing, though men count it by centuries or cause it to dwindle down to dying moments. Let us accustom ourselves to the thought that above our life stand the seraphim; round about all our noblest impulses, desires, and ambitions stand the seraphim; that is to say, we are cared for, watched, loved, and protected by the living God. Thoughts of this kind redeem our life from its insignificance by showing us its true suggestiveness and indicating its purposed destiny. In every little thing see some symbol of the great thing. In time see the beginning of eternity. In life, as we know it, see the type of life as God lives it. Thus the whole universe becomes a sacred temple; all life a holy worship; all destiny a sublime and beneficent decree. Set the Lord always before you; in the high noon when the sun burns in his meridian splendour see a dim emblem of the relation which God sustains to all nature, all life, all evolution.

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*"If ye will not believe surely ye shall not be established."*—ISA. vii. 9.

In all these outlines it is presumed that the preacher will read the text and first give the literal interpretation. Many of them are accommodations of singular or pithy sayings, and this fact must not be overlooked by those who use the "Handfuls." Here is a case in point. The prophet had declared that within a given time Ephraim should be broken, that it should be no longer a people. The king would not believe this prophecy, and his incredulity was plainly visible in his face. The special

use which may be made of the text is that faith is always necessary to real consolidation of character and success of policy. This is the larger meaning of that which at the time was a merely local and personal incident. Let a man have the impression that he is not going to succeed in what he undertakes, and the probability is that he will fail. On the other hand, let him have a strong conviction that failure is impossible, and his courage will rise in proportion, and all his faculties be set into active exercise under a very solemn and joyous inspiration. This holds good of all personal culture; of all educational efforts; of all social and public reforms; and indeed of the whole range of spiritual life. First of all, let us be assured that the object of our policy is right. Unless we have that assurance we have no right to have any faith in it. Note the very right of faith is denied. To have faith in wrong is to squander faith. No wrong can ever come to ultimate success. It will have its risings and fallings, and maybe its many indications of coming to baleful fruition; but the word of the Lord is against it, and all heaven frowns upon it, and all providence will meet it in continual repulsion. The end of evil is overthrow, how strong soever may be the faith of those who have undertaken to support it. No faith can stand against the living God. Having assured ourselves that we are right in our purpose and our methods, what we need is faith, trust, confidence, courage. Do not imagine that even good things intended for our adoption and exercise will prosper unless we accompany their acceptance with the exercise of the requisite energy. The seed is good, and the ground is good, but the seed must be sown or the harvest can never be reaped. Man did not make the seed; man did not make the ground; but man must bring the seed and the ground together under proper



conditions ; at that point human energy interposes and discharges its responsibility. This text is a word of inspiration and solid comfort to all men who are engaged in carrying out reforms that often wear a hopeless aspect. Believe in God, and he will bring the battle to victory. Consult God at every step in the development of your reforms, and do nothing out of vanity or mere conceit, and the end shall be contentment and blessedness. Many men profess the Gospel who do not believe it. Many men work in a spirit of sentimental hope instead of a spirit of moral courage. Some workers disable themselves by excessive sighing. Instead of giving themselves resolutely to the work, they vaguely hope that the end will be good, and they sentimentally trust that nothing will happen to frustrate the purpose of God. All such feeling is below the dignity of the occasion. Let our daily prayer be, "Lord, increase our faith," then our part of the work will be done well, and God will not forget to do his part, and bring his purposes to consummation.

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*"Should not a people seek unto their God? for the living to the dead?"*

—ISA. viii. 19.

Isaiah was surrounded by people who could not rid themselves of the delusion that they ought to consult the soothsayers. In Isaiah's time soothsayers were numerous and popular. Why should they not be consulted as to the fortunes awaiting themselves and others? What were soothsayers for if they were not to be consulted? Thus the supply has a very definite bearing upon the demand. When we have opportunities why should we not avail ourselves of them? The soothsayer can do us no harm if he can do us no good, therefore why not consult him? This is the vicious reasoning of the

vain heart. To all such reasoning Isaiah would oppose great doctrines that men should seek unto their God, and seek only for such knowledge as is good for them. It has been pointed out that the latter part of the question is abruptly elliptical ; probably it ought to be read thus : "*Are men to seek on behalf of the living to the dead?*" Isaiah was no believer in spirit-rapping. He asks why the dead should be recalled. He seems to suggest that even if they were recalled they would know no more than the living. Possibly they might not know so much. Isaiah seems to regard the state of the departed not as one of annihilation, but of dormant powers or powers partially disabled, powers that might be revived so as to be made use of in the calculation of human fortune. Isaiah sets himself against all appeals to the dead on behalf of the living. Does the prophet leave the people without a court of appeal? He not only directs them to the living God, but he points "to the law and to the testimony." By this we are to understand the word of Jehovah which was actually spoken to the prophet himself. Isaiah was conscious of being in immediate and vital contact with the Source of life and power, and as he stood before the people he stood as an embodied revelation. Revelation brings with it conscious identification with God. When a man is speaking what may be called the greater truth, or the truth in its larger relations, he is perfectly aware that he is not speaking out of his own vanity but out of knowledge that has been spiritually communicated to him. Isaiah would have the people turn to this revelation, whether written or whether personified. He would have all soothsayers and all their victims tested by the higher standard. If there is any light in them they will speak according to the word of God, and if they speak otherwise it

is because they have mistaken darkness for light. Probably men will be driven from their soothsaying and other vanities to the true law. The prophet would seem to argue that men will come to the true revelation when all other sources of supposed information and inspiration are closed against them. When men look up into heaven and there is no light, and round them upon the earth and there is no dawn, when they wait for the coming of the sun in heaven, and when through all the darkness they can see no shining of the stars, then Isaiah would seem to say they will turn to the word and to the testimony, that is, to the true revelation of God. No man need be in any difficulty as to duty, as to the course of right, as to the discharge of all his highest responsibilities; the Bible, whatever else may be said about it or even in disparagement of it, utters no uncertain sound as to the culture of the soul and the obedience of the whole life to the divine sovereignty. If men say they are willing to receive light if they could only get it, they are deceiving themselves so long as the Bible lies unopened, unread, or unappreciated. Everything needful for the salvation of the soul, the culture of the spirit, and the most blessed destiny of the life, is revealed in the volume which we hold to be inspired. We are to test all prophets by this book. We are not to be deceived by the glamour of their poetry, or by the passion of their rhetoric; we are to test everything by the law and by the testimony. Thus the soul is pointed in the direction of sureness and is led into the sanctuary of rational as well as pious contentment. We are not to dwell upon isolated texts, or upon out-of-the-way words and phrases; we are to judge everything not by some partial text but by the entire spirit of the Bible. That spirit is symbolic of light, charity, all manner

of spiritual greatness; nothing that is little, mean, contracted, or contemptible is endorsed or sanctioned by the word of the living God. The age needs to be continually cautioned against the quotation of texts or the citation of passages torn from their surroundings. Above all things, learn that there is a Biblical spirit as well as a Biblical letter.

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*"For the leaders of this people cause them to err."*—ISA. ix. 16.

This is the last result of debased society. When the light that is in us becomes darkness, how great is that darkness! Isaiah and Jeremiah both regard as utterly contemptible and worthless those who professed to be spiritual guides and yet who guided themselves by selfish considerations. Whether this verse was really in the original text or whether it was a merely marginal note, it is absolutely certain that the spirit of it is proved by the history of all ages. The verse may therefore be used by way of accommodation to show that even our leaders and guides are not to be trusted simply because they happen to sustain official positions. The law and the testimony may always be trusted: they cannot be bribed, they cannot be perverted, except by the basest quality of mind; the people must go to the law and to the testimony for themselves, often putting aside teacher and priest that they may see the living word with their own eyes. Even leadership is not exempt from temptation. The greatest statesmen may have objects of their own to gain. On the finest robe of patriotism there may be spots which only the divine eyes can detect. We should therefore be Bible-readers on our own account; not only readers of the mere letter, but readers of the sum total. Society may be said to be shaken at its very base when its great

men allow their minds to be corrupted. This is true politically, but how much more true in relation to all matters that are spiritual and divine. When the pulpit is wrong how can the pew be right? The prophet who has beclouded his vision, or so distorted it as to accommodate it to human wish and human conceit, is likely to acquire an immediate influence, simply because the heart which he addresses is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, is indeed prepared to receive any lie as a way of escape from the severe discipline by which God trains and strengthens the soul. We shall be judges according to our position and influence. How deep the condemnation of those who knew the right and yet pursued the wrong; men who held the holy Word and gave it an unholy interpretation! Leaders and prophets should examine themselves, because even they have not escaped the contagion of human nature; even they are not free from those insidious temptations which often take the soul unawares. Leaders and prophets are tempted to believe that they are free from many of the restraints which they would impose upon other people. The larger our capacity and the larger our influence, the more keen should be our self-inspection, the more wakeful should be our daily vigilance. Here is a lesson to parents, to teachers, to reformers, and to all men of influence.

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*"The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the falling together; and a little child shall lead them."*

—ISA. xi. 6.

Some have seen in these words a promise that the animal world should in some way share in the blessings of redemption. It has been supposed by them that rapine and cruelty were signs

of an imperfect order, and that when man is put right as to his spirit and action the influence of the restoration will be felt as widely as was the influence of his fall. We need not attempt to give the words a literal fulfilment. They admit of an accommodation which is most legitimate, indeed, so legitimate as to hardly be an accommodation. It is almost a literal interpretation of them to point out that the great object of the kingdom of heaven amongst men is to drive away all disorder, all cruelty, all wrong-doing, and to bring universal Sabbath to shine upon the darkness and the tumult of time. These words may be taken as allegorical or as literal, according to the conviction of the reader. It is certain, however, that when the work of Christ is perfected upon the earth there shall be a great reconciliation of classes, of interests, and of policies; man shall no longer vex man, or oppress him, or reap his fortunes in the fields of human misery. We have to-day, even amongst men, the wealthy and the lowly, the strong and the weak, the rapacious and the unselfish. We need not go to zoology to find instances of opposed temper and blood. We find such instances in abundance amongst ourselves. There are men of uncontrollable temper, men of insatiable cupidity, men of consuming ambition, men gentle, patient, and helpful. Indeed, the words "the wolf" and "the lamb" almost literally represent the varieties of temper which we find in human society. If we regard the words as conveying a Gospel promise, then they may be so read as to give us the assurance that when the work of Christ is complete in the earth all men will feel the passion and enter into the joy of true brotherhood. All rapacity, cruelty, selfishness, will be done away. Any religion that contemplates such a consummation is by so much a religion that ought to challenge our reason and

our confidence. Note how grand, how glorious the object of Christ's kingdom is continually represented to be. It is never associated with anything that is petty or dishonourable. It is never brought in to the loss of any honest soul. Wherever the kingdom of Christ comes, summer comes, Sabbath comes, a great harvest of joy comes. Judge the kingdom by its results. Judge the Cross of Christ not by some metaphysical standard but by the great object which it has in view, and it will be then seen that behind all the mystery is a purpose of love—vast as infinity, tender as the very spirit of pity.

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*"Is this the man that made the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms; that made the world as a wilderness, and destroyed the cities thereof; that opened not the house of his prisoners?"—ISA. xiv. 16, 17.*

The prophet is not thinking of the shadow-world, which we know by the name of Hades; he is rather looking upon the field of battle and observing the corpse of some mighty conqueror. So far as the words relate to the king of Babylon, or any other king, they are of small consequence to us. They become, however, immensely significant, when we look at them as suggesting that the mightiest power is weaker than weakness itself when pitted against the throne of God. Enemies appear to be great in the distance. They are actually great when they are looked at simply within their own limits: see what learning they have; see what iron instruments the soldiers bring to the field of war; see what mighty captains ride forth as if plumed already with victory before the battle begins; yet hear this voice of sarcasm, which says to them when they are stretched out upon the field of war, "Is this the man that made the earth

to tremble?" How small he is, how weak, how utterly helpless now! And this is the fate of all who set themselves to counterwork the purposes of Providence. History enables us to look back and to measure events by the right standard. Regarded in this light, history is a continual testimony to the almightiness and the all-goodness of heaven. Where are the enemies of the faith? Mighty men have risen to put down the Cross: where are they to-day? Ponderous works have been written in order to disprove the Christian argument, or to divest it of its moral appeals: where are those works? Negation builds no churches. Destruction can point to no temple of paradise, no asylum of protection, no Bethlehem of promise. Christianity itself has a work of destruction to do; but it would be comparatively powerless if it did not connect its constructive with its destructive vocation. The Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives but to save them. When Christ kills, he kills that he may make alive. This is the difference between Christianity and all its opposing theories; the theories live in opposition only, but Christianity lives in positive and helpful faith.

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*"The seed of evildoers shall never be renowned."—ISA. xiv. 20.*

The literal rendering would be—*shall not be named for ever*. A parallel will be found in Jer. xxii. 30, in the sentence pronounced on Coniah. As a matter of fact certain great dynasties have utterly disappeared from history. No dynasty is necessary to God. There are brief courses marked by dazzling splendour, but the night overtakes the day, and the noontide becomes midnight. There are certain great principles which underlie the declaration of the text. It is of the very nature of evil to perish of its own



corruption. Evil is suicidal. It would seem to be impossible that evil can be immortal, because it continually falls into deepening weakness under its own action. Cancer never leads to health. Evil is moral cancer, and must end in the extinction of strength and of life. It is not necessary that evil should die to-morrow, or in the next generation. God's judgments are always pronounced in the light of great breadths of time. For a generation, or two, or three, evil may seem to prosper, and to be a living contradiction of the spirit of the Bible. This, however, is only apparent. The eternal law is that evil is self-destructive. The important point to be remembered by evil-minded persons is that they are not injuring themselves only. The mischief which they do follows their posterity. The deed which is done to-day may reappear in unhappy effects in the experience of a century hence. Surely there should be some restraining influence arising from this reflection. But how can evil restrain itself? It lives on its own rioting and tumult, and being intensely selfish, it cannot project its imagination into the issues of time. What is true of evil in the matter of self-destruction is true of good in the matter of self-propagation. All good is rooted in God. The eternity of God therefore is the guarantee of the immortality of goodness. It is of the quality of God himself. It may be said to be an element of his own being. Goodness therefore cannot die. The lamp of the wicked shall be blown out, but the seed of the righteous shall go on from strength to strength evermore. Yet even here a word of caution must be spoken. Though there is a hereditary law in the matter both of evil and of good, it must not be understood that a man is hopelessly condemned because his ancestors were evil, or that a man is necessarily saved because his ancestors were good. The

general law may be modified by particular instances. If any man, looking over a long list of progenitors, cannot find a good name amongst them, that is no reason why he himself should not repent and pray. On the other hand, a man may look through a long family record adorned with illustrious names, yet if he himself be not faithful, if he himself be not in Christ by the power of the soul's trust, wrought by the energy of the Holy Ghost, his family record will stand him in no good stead in the day of judgment. The renown of the hypocrite is a poor reward. The blessing that rests upon the righteous is itself of the quality of heaven.

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*"He shall come to his sanctuary to pray; but he shall not prevail."*—  
ISA. xvi. 12.

Such was the judgment pronounced upon Moab. When Moab appeared as a worshipper, when he wearied himself on the high place, all his litanies and his outcry and prayers went for nothing. We know what the crying priests of Baal came to when Elijah challenged them on Mount Carmel. They called from the morning until the evening, but their deaf god heard them not. There is a prayer, therefore, that has no effect. But is this the fault of prayer? Not necessarily so. It may be the fault of the suppliant. "The prayers of the wicked are an abomination unto the Lord." "Ye have not because ye ask not," is one explanation which the apostle gives of unanswered prayer; the second explanation he gives is "or because ye have asked amiss"—asked in the wrong spirit, asked for the wrong things, asked at the wrong time. The sanctuary is never to be regarded merely as a refuge in distress, or as a convenience of which men may avail themselves in the time of hopeless calamity. Moab did not go to the

right sanctuary, nor did he offer the right prayer. We may come to the right sanctuary, and yet our prayers may be unavailing. We are not to make Jacob-like bargaining with God. We are not to say we can at any time turn to the sanctuary and make things right with God. Unless the purpose of our life be itself a prayer, any mere words we can utter will end in disappointment and chagrin. The humble soul will prevail in the sanctuary because of its very humility. God will not allow hands steeped in human blood to be lifted to him in availing prayer. If we have left a false weight and a false measure that we may go into the sanctuary to pray, we shall find that we are praying to an empty heaven. If we come to the altar with our sacrifice and leave behind us a brother whom we have offended, God will not receive the sacrifice until we have reconciled the offended brother. Character is prayer. Character is eloquence. Not until we ourselves are right can we either find the true sanctuary or breathe the true desire.

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*"And it shall be as when the harvestman gathereth the corn, and reapeth the ears with his arm; and it shall be as he that gathereth ears in the valley of Rephaim."—ISA. xvii. 5.*

How beautiful is this picture! How suggestive of fertility, of abundance upon abundance, of harvest music and harvest joy! Yet in this text there is no sound of music. The harvest is represented as a harvest of devastation. This is the burden of Damascus. Damascus is disfranchised; the cities of Aroer are forsaken; the fortress has ceased from Ephraim; the glory of Jacob has been made faint; and now it is as if ravening beasts had rushed through fields white unto the harvest, and trodden them underfoot, and rendered them worthless. The valley of

Rephaim is the valley of giants (Josh. xv. 8, xviii. 16). The valley was famous for its fruitfulness, and was a favourite field for the Philistines to plunder. Constantly they carried off its abundant crops (2 Sam. xxiii. 13). For whom are we growing our harvests? We may have an abundant harvest, and yet never reap it. We may lay up much goods for many years, and yet have no pleasure in them. Do not suppose that we are rich because the harvest is plentiful. Whilst we are on the way, scythe in hand, to cut down the field, wild beasts may devastate it, or a blight from heaven may destroy its value. "Call no man happy until he is dead" is the wisdom of the old proverb. Call no harvest precious until it has been garnered. All life is exposed to peril. This exposure is part of our discipline, is indeed a necessary element in our training. The whole earth is the land of the enemy. "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal." Let your harvest be internal, spiritual, divine; let it be a harvest of noble purposes, thorough convictions, spiritual comforts. Bank your money with the deserving poor. Feed the hungry and clothe the naked. These are the harvests that no Philistine can devastate.

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*"In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish: but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow."—ISA. xvii. 11.*

Once more we come to the harvest. What will the harvest be? is the great question which men should put to themselves. Syria and Ephraim entered into an alliance which grew with amazing rapidity. At a certain time, all appeared to be prosperous, plentiful, and satisfac-



tory. Yet all the harvest-heaps were destined to end not in the joy of harvest, but in grief and incurable pain. Do not look at the growing plant alone. Your investment is successful. But if that investment imply injustice, robbery, monopoly, gambling, or trickery, when you go out to reap the harvest you will only thrust your sickle into a field of darkness. In the case before us the seed flourished in the morning, and at eventide there was an appearance of a great return from the seed that had been sown. How foolish are they who look at appearances only! Where things are wrong in their origin they must be wrong in their issue. Between the origin and the issue there may be great fluctuation of fortune, or the good fortune may decidedly preponderate over the bad. But be assured of this: God is not mocked: when the seed that is sown has been bad, it is impossible that the harvest which is to be reaped can be good. Every man must face the results of his own seed-sowing. We cannot claim another man's field when God comes to judgment. The judgment of God is founded upon facts, upon reason, upon justice. When a man sees how ruinous a harvest he has to gather, he will say to his own heart, This is just; this is the outworking of true reason; I sowed the wind, now I am called to reap the whirlwind. "Thou wicked and slothful servant; out of thine own mouth do I condemn thee." The wicked sower must be the disappointed reaper.

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*"I will set the Egyptians against the Egyptians."*—ISA. xix. 2.

It should be understood that in many of these detached texts we avail ourselves of the practice of accommodation. Here is an instance which admits of accommodation of a practical kind. God has various ways of troubling men and

bringing about the purposes of his providence. A man may be his own enemy. He may be as a kingdom divided against itself. Passing from the individual man to the social relation, it is possible for a man's foes to be they of his own household. Understand, therefore, that we are not always exposed to attacks from a foreign source, but that mischief of the deadliest kind may arise within our boundaries. The most deadly of all hatred is that between brothers. The most deplorable of all wars is civil war. Unanimity is shattered; natural alliances are rendered impossible; the councils that ought to be united are turned to confusion; and men know not when they hit out in the dark whether they are striking at friends or foes. It is instructive to notice that God claims all these ministries and engines of operation as distinctly under his own providence. God may be the author of civil war. God may employ evil in order to bring about good; not that he tolerates moral evil or looks with any degree of approval upon it, but he permits social evil, civil wars, misunderstandings, unnatural alliances, to concur in bringing about an evolution otherwise humanly impossible. Even the wicked are servants of God unconsciously. The wrath of man is under his control, and he makes it serve him. The great lesson which we have to lay to heart is not to be looking far away upon the horizon for possible foes, but to be looking into our own hearts, and into our own families and churches. When equals meet in contest what can the result be but destruction? Man was not made to be set against man. Families were meant to be united. Churches should be compact and unanimous, having the full use of their total strength for the propagation of good and the abolition of evil. Remember that God can bring up enemies from unexpected places.

"Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth."—ISA. xxi. 6.

This is a favourite figure of the prophet. (Compare Ezek. xxxiii. 7, and Hab. ii. 1, 2.) In vision the prophet is placed upon a lofty pile, and from that eminence he looks abroad upon the whole field of human action, and reports what passes under his own eyesight. A watchman is not a warrior. We must always notice the distribution of functions in spiritual and social life. Though the watchman is not a warrior, yet the warrior would be weaker did he lack the guidance of the watcher's eyes. The watcher draws no sword, yet to him may the victory in no small degree be due. We need in the Church quiet, observant, contemplative men. Yet there must be a limit even to a watchman's silence. The lifting of a finger may be enough in some instances, or the holding forth of an appointed signal. In other cases there must be a loud crying out, so that men may know that danger is imminent. The circumstances of each case will determine the watchman's duty. The unfaithful watchman is a murderer. This doctrine applies to preachers, teachers, statesmen, patriots, and to all persons susceptible of deep conviction and charged with high responsibilities. Woe to the world when the watchmen are asleep or are selfishly silent.

"*Their strength is to sit still.*"—ISA. xxx. 7.

The Revised Version reads, "*Therefore have I called her Rahab that sitteth still.*" A poetical name for Egypt is found in chapter li. 9, Job xxvi. 12, and in Psalm lxxxvii. 4. The term seems to suggest the idea of empty boasting, very lofty and inflated self-sufficiency and arrogance. The idea of Rahab sitting still is regarded by some critics as almost a political caricature.

The meaning is very different from that which is usually attached to the text. Yet the common signification of the text is true in personal experience and in Church history. We often find that we do everything by doing nothing. Lethargy is not rest. Self-surrender to what may be called the spirit of fatalism is entirely without moral merit. The man who gives up the strife because he is weary of it or longing for self-indulgence does not realise the peace of God. He is a coward, and must be regarded as such. We can only truly sit still when we do so with the full consent of our understanding and conscience, our reason and love. Every man ought to give God some opportunity of coming into his life. There is a self-watchfulness which is little better than atheism. We are bound to do whatever lies in our power, but we should be spiritually instructed to discern the time when we should literally stand still and await the issues of Providence. Do not stand still as the result of the relaxation of self-discipline. Stand still in the moment when you wish to go forward, but when you are so enabled to control yourselves as to allow God to carry on his own war in his own way. He is rich in heavenly wisdom who knows when to strike, and when to cease from striking; when to go on with desperate energy, and when to stand still with patience and silent expectation.

"*The vile person shall be no more called liberal, nor the churl said to be bountiful.*"—ISA. xxxii. 5.

There is a morality of names. When charity wishes to speak well of the vile person or the churl charity loses all its charm. It is no longer charity, it is no longer charity, it is falsehood. There will come a time when a name shall stand for character. It may be right for us to speak strong words concerning

our fellow-men, even such words as "the vile persons" and "the churl." Woe unto us when we do not distinguish between light and darkness. The enlightened conscience is ever critical. It does not examine cases for the purpose of finding fault with them, or discovering fault in them, but when it does detect a fault it gives it conspicuousness and pronounces upon it in unequivocal language. Never let us forget the self-application of some texts. We should sometimes call ourselves vile persons; and some of us ought now and then to look in upon our own heart and call it churlish. Social criticism is of immense advantage, but even that advantage will be increased if it be preceded by self-criticism. How many of us would be dumb in judgment if we could only speak in the degree in which we know ourselves to be worthy of moral credit. Every man must search his own heart, and speak with the degree of authority which he finds there. It is one thing to read sentences out of a magisterial code and to pronounce those sentences against public or private offenders, and another to take all our judgments out of the record of our own hearts. How temperate we should often be; how oftentimes we should see that a man who has infirmities of a very obvious kind may even have more virtues than some of his judges can rightfully claim. "Judge not that ye be not judged." "Blessed are the merciful." Thus we have criticism forbidden and criticism encouraged. Preachers and leaders must speak out concerning the men who are offending the law of God without violating the law of the state. We should not only expel the drunkard, we should expel the covetous man. Not only should we denounce the debauchee, we should pursue the liar into his place of hiding, and hold the light of God above his deceit. Judgment should begin at the house of God.

"*The lame take the prey.*"—ISA. xxxiii. 23.

These words may be variously interpreted. In the case of Assyria the ship was being plundered by the very persons whom it came to plunder. In ancient times there was a law that the lame should be regarded as incapable of service, and should further be deprived from taking their share in the spoils. By way of accommodation, we may look upon this text as showing that sometimes victories are won by people who are apparently disintituled to take any part in the war. God chooses the weak things of the world to overthrow the mighty. The whole providence of God seems to be so constituted as to baffle the calculator, and to prevent any man making an investment of his faith or prophetic gift. God is always doing things we never expected him to do. Thus we cannot anticipate him, or forestall him, or predict him with any selfish certainty. We can only declare that he will do that which is right, that he will bring forth righteousness as the morning. As to the details of his action, and as to the instruments he will employ in developing his purpose, we know nothing. The lame are not to be despised. Even a lame man may be able to open a gate, or to point out a road, or to tell which way the enemy went. Remember that the poor wise man delivered the city when the mighty king came against it. Despise no talent, how small soever. God has often surprised his critics by showing how the weakest may be made more than the strongest. Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings praise has been perfected. God has raised up of the dust children unto Abraham. He pours contempt upon all our ideas of stature and strength, capability and force. Let him choose his own servants. Let him ordain his own ministers.

THE  
BOOK OF THE PROPHET JEREMIAH.

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CATECHETICAL NOTES.

- Q.* What does the word *Jeremiah* mean ?  
*A.* It means, " Whom Jehovah has appointed."
- Q.* Who was his father ?  
*A.* Hilkihah, a priest of Anathoth in the land of Benjamin.
- Q.* How far was Anathoth from Jerusalem ?  
*A.* About three Roman miles.
- Q.* Is Hilkihah the high-priest named in the Second Book of Kings ?  
*A.* Probably not. There is nothing in the prophecies of Jeremiah to confirm this view, and his residence at Anathoth places him in the line of Abiathar, whom Solomon deposed from the office of high-priest.
- Q.* At what period of life did the word of the Lord come to Jeremiah ?  
*A.* Whilst he was very young, in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah (B.C. 629).
- Q.* Did Jeremiah always live at Anathoth ?  
*A.* No. To escape persecution, both from town and family, Jeremiah left Anathoth, and took up his residence in Jerusalem. During eighteen years' residence in Jerusalem Jeremiah delivered his prophecies without interruption.
- Q.* What great religious event took place during the reign of Josiah ?  
*A.* The reformation of religious worship (2 Kings xxiii)

*Q.* Was the reformation successful ?

*A.* No. It was reformation by force, by repression, and therefore it could not be really and lastingly successful. As soon as the influence of the court was withdrawn it was seen that the people had not undergone the process of spiritual conviction.

*Q.* Who succeeded Josiah ?

*A.* Jehoahaz. He reigned only three months, and nothing is known of Jeremiah during that period.

*Q.* Who succeeded Jehoahaz ?

*A.* Jehoiakim (B.C. 607-597). During the eleven years of his reign Jeremiah was specially active.

*Q.* What special prophecies did he then deliver ?

*A.* At the very beginning of the reign Jeremiah foretold the desolation of the temple. He said it was to be laid waste even as Shiloh had been (xxvi. 6).

*Q.* How was this prophecy received ?

*A.* With general indignation. Jeremiah indeed was threatened with death (xxvi. 8).

*Q.* What other prophecy did he at this time deliver ?

*A.* He foretold the seventy years of the captivity, and in a symbol he gave the cup of Jehovah's wrath to all the nations that were to fall under the yoke of Babylon.

*Q.* Did Jeremiah write his own prophecies ?

*A.* He had a secretary or amanuensis named Baruch who wrote at his dictation. Jeremiah seldom appeared personally in public, so Baruch read the prophecies to the crowds that thronged the courts of the Temple.

*Q.* How was such reading regarded ?

*A.* With intense dislike. When the king heard of it he burned the parchment roll, and gave orders for the arrest of the prophet and the scribe.

*Q.* Were they captured ?

*A.* No. They not only escaped, they re-wrote all that had been destroyed.

- Q.* Had Jeremiah's method any special characteristic at this time ?
- A.* Yes. He adopted a strikingly symbolic form or method of teaching.
- Q.* Did Jeremiah travel much during this reign ?
- A.* He took two journeys to Euphrates (xiii. 1-11).
- Q.* Who succeeded Jehoiakim ?
- A.* Jehoiachin (B.C. 597).
- Q.* Did he reign long ?
- A.* He was deposed by Nebuchadnezzar, after a reign of three months.
- Q.* For what were those three months remarkable ?
- A.* For the fulfilment of Jeremiah's predictions as to the captivity of the king's predecessor, and of the king himself, together with all the officers of their courts and their principal citizens.
- Q.* Who was the next king ?
- A.* Zedekiah (B.C. 597-586).
- Q.* Who appointed him ?
- A.* Nebuchadnezzar.
- Q.* How did the king treat the prophet ?
- A.* With marked consideration (xxxvii., xxxviii.).
- Q.* Was the king a strong man ?
- A.* No. Zedekiah was weak and vacillating, and Jeremiah felt more and more that only the "vile figs" had been left in Judah, and the good ones taken to Babylon.
- Q.* Did Jeremiah continue his symbolic teaching under this reign ?
- A.* Yes. He was to be seen in the streets of Jerusalem with bonds and yokes upon his neck, signifying that such should be the fate of Judah and its cities.
- Q.* How was Jeremiah treated ?
- A.* With great cruelty. He was thrown into a dungeon, and finally into the prison-pit, where he was left to perish in its foulness.



- Q.* Who delivered him from this revolting fate ?
- A.* Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian eunuch, and he was kept in the comparatively mild custody of the king's house.
- Q.* What beautiful incident is told of the prophet at this time ?
- A.* Ellicott's Bible says: "At no period of his life is the prophet truer to his calling. He had before to fight against false hopes of liberation. He has now to contend against the despair which made men lose all faith in the promises of God and in their own future. That danger the prophet was taught to meet in the most effectual way. With a confidence in that future which has been compared to that of the Roman who bought at its full value the very ground on which the forces of Hannibal were encamped, he, too, bought with all requisite formalities the field at Anathoth, which his kinswoman Hanameel wished to get rid of (xxvii. 6-9), and proclaimed not only that 'fields and vineyards should again be possessed in the land,' but that the voice of gladness should once more be heard there, and that under 'the Lord our Righteousness, the house of David, and the priests, the Levites should never be without representatives.'"

The remainder of his life must be read in the prophecies themselves.

### GENERAL NOTES.

1. Some distinguished commentators have assigned thirty of the Psalms to the authorship of Jeremiah.
2. Some singular parallelisms with the Law have been noted :—

Compare Jer. xi. 3-5 with Deut. iv. 20 ; vii. 12 ;

" " xxxiv. 14 " " xv. 12 ;

" " xxxii. 18 " Exod. xx. 6 ;

" " xxxii. 21 " " vi. 6.

3. Jeremiah was contemporary with Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Ezekiel, and Daniel. The only one really connected with him is Ezekiel. It is agreed that the mind of Jeremiah is of a finer texture than Ezekiel's, though Jerome complained of its rusticity.
4. Ewald maintains that "the book, in its present form, is from ch. i. to ch. xlix. substantially the same, as it came from the hand of the

prophet, or his amanuensis, and seeks to discover in the present arrangement some plan according to which it is disposed. He finds that various portions are prefaced by the same formula, 'The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord' (vii. 1; xi. 1; xviii. 1; xxi. 1; xxv. 1; xxx. 1; xxxii. 1; xxxiv. 1, 8; xxxv. 1; xl. 1; xlv. 1), or by the very similar expression, 'The word of the Lord which came to Jeremiah' (xiv. 1; xlv. 1; xlvii. 1; xlix. 34). The notices of time distinctly mark some other divisions which are more or less historical (xxvi. 1; xxvii. 1; xxxvi. 1; xxxvii. 1). Two other portions are in themselves sufficiently distinct without such indication (xxix. 1; xlv. 1), whilst the general introduction to the book serves for the section contained in ch. i. There are left two sections (ch. ii., iii.), the former of which has only the shorter introduction, which generally designates the commencement of a strophe; while the latter, as it now stands, seems to be imperfect, having as an introduction merely the word 'saying.' Thus the book is divided into twenty-three separate and independent sections, which, in the poetical parts, are again divided into strophes of from seven to nine verses, frequently distinguished by such a phrase as 'The Lord said also unto me.' These separate sections are arranged by Ewald so as to form five distinct books:—I. The introduction, ch. i.;—II. Reproofs of the ins of the Jews, ch. ii.–xxiv., consisting of seven sections—viz., 1. ch. ii., 2. ch. iii.–vi., 3. ch. vii.–x., 4. ch. xi.–xiii., 5. ch. xiv.–xvii. 18, 6. ch. xvii. 19–xx., 7. ch. xxi.–xxiv.;—III. A general review of all nations, the heathen as well as the people of Israel, consisting of two sections, 1. ch. xlv.–xlix. (which he thinks have been transposed), 2. ch. xxv., and an historical appendix of three sections, 1. ch. xxvi., 2. ch. xxvii., and 3. ch. xxviii.–xxix.;—IV. Two sections picturing the hopes of brighter times, 1. ch. xxx.–xxxi., and 2. ch. xxxii., xxxiii., to which, as in the last book, is added an historical appendix in three sections, 1. ch. xxxiv. 1–7, 2. ch. xxxiv. 8–22, 3. ch. xxxv.;—V. The conclusion, in two sections, 1. ch. xxxvi., 2. ch. xlv. All this, he supposes, was arranged in Palestine, during the short interval of rest between the taking of the city and the departure of Jeremiah with the remnant of the Jews to Egypt. In Egypt, after some interval, Jeremiah added three sections—viz., ch. xxxvii.–xxxix., xl.–xliii., and xlv. At the same time, probably, he added ch. xlv. 13–26 to the previous prophecy respecting Egypt, and, perhaps, made some additions to other parts previously written."

5. There are seven other Jeremiahs mentioned in Scripture.
6. Dante quotes Jeremiah largely, and was evidently indebted to him for much inspiration.
7. The time, place, and manner of Jeremiah's death are unknown. It is estimated that his age was between seventy and seventy-five. Some of the fathers say that he was stoned at Tahpanhes. This is mere conjecture.

## INTRODUCTORY.

"The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, of the priests that were in Anathoth, in the land of Benjamin" (Jer. i. 1).

*Senior*  
IN the first chapter of the book which bears his name Jeremiah gives an account of his divine call to the prophetic office. Let us look at that account for the purpose of finding out, if we can, whether there was anything in the call of Jeremiah which corresponds with what we now find in the call of earnest men, and whether we can be as certain of our heavenly call as Jeremiah was of his. It is very remarkable that the ancient prophets always kept steadily before them the exact way by which they were led up to their office, and were always ready to vindicate themselves by a plain statement of facts. It is remarkable, too, that they could trace their heavenly election as clearly as their earthly parentage; so much so, that, as a rule, they put on record both pedigrees, so to speak, side by side; first, that which was natural; afterwards, that which was spiritual; and the one was as much a living and indisputable fact as the other. Thus Jeremiah said, "Hilkiah was my father, and the Word of the Lord came unto me," two things separated by an infinite distance, yet both matters of positive and unquestionable certainty. Jeremiah would have treated with equal indifference or contempt the suggestion that Hilkiah was not his father and that the Lord had never spoken to him. Let us trace the history somewhat, and see what it teaches to aftertimes.

"Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations" (ver. 4).

The two great blessings of election and mediation are here distinctly taught. God did not speak to the nations directly, but mediatorially; he created a minister who should be his mouth-piece. Observation itself teaches us that men are called and

~~chosen of God to do special work in all departments of life.~~ The difficult lesson for some of us to learn is that we are called to obscurity, and yet this is as clearly a divine appointment as is the choice of an Isaiah or a Jeremiah. If you look at life, you will see that the most of men are called to quietness, to honest industry, and to what is mistakenly called common-place existence. What of it? Shall the plain murmur because it is not a mountain? Shall the green fields complain that Mont Blanc is higher than they? If they have not his majesty, neither have they his barrenness. To see our calling, to accept it, to honour it, that is the truly godly and noble life! To feel that we are where God meant us to be—following the plough or directing a civilisation—is to be strong and calm. Every man is born to realise some purpose. Find that purpose out, and fulfil it if you would lovingly serve God. We find no difficulty in persuading a man that he is a Jeremiah or a Daniel, at any rate that, under certain circumstances, he might easily have turned out a Hannibal or a Wellington. He was quite predisposed in that direction of thinking, and if he would not go so far as openly to avow it, he would yet intimate that he certainly does not feel that his present situation is big enough for him. The difficulty, on the contrary, is to persuade a man that the lowliest lot, as well as the highest, is the appointment of God; that door-keeping is a promotion in the divine gift; and that to light a lamp may be as surely a call of God as to found an empire or to rule a world.

"Then said I, Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child. But the Lord said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord" (vers. 6-8).

It is thus that fear and confidence make up our best life. We are sure that God has called us, yet we dread to set down our feet on the way which he has marked out with the clearness of light. Moses said he was slow of speech; Jeremiah said he could not speak for he was a child; and we in our lesser way have set up our feeble excuses against the thunder of God. And yet, fear well becomes our mortality; for what is our strength? and as for our days, their number is small. We forget God,—his almightiness and his eternity are put out of

sight, and therefore our heart sinks in dismay. And a deadly error lurks here. We are apt to mistake our fear for religious modesty, and by so much we cast indirect reproach upon others. When we plead inability to do God's work, we are in reality profanely distrusting God's strength. Are not many of us standing back with a wicked excuse in our mouths? Are we not pleading illness, or weakness, or inability, or incapacity, that we may escape the burden and heat of the day? With what resentment should we encounter the suggestion of weakness were it to come from others! And yet we hold it up as a plea and a defence against the commands of heaven! Beautiful is modesty in its own place; a heavenly flower, sweet, tender, and precious; but never forget that there is something which closely imitates its loveliest features, and that its foul name is—Hypocrisy.

"Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant" (vers. 9, 10).

You made much of your own weakness, now what are you going to make of God's strength? You may obstinately persist in looking at your own small arm, or you may piously turn to the almightiness of God, and draw your power from eternity; and upon your choice will depend your whole after life. Get into the irreligious habit of measuring everything by your own resources; of asking whether you are personally equal to this or that task; and in all probability you will cower in abject fear before the burden and servitude of life: but get into the contrary habit,—the habit of setting God always at your right hand, and of being sure that Right must prevail, that the helping angels never tire, that though God's mill grinds slow, it grinds exceeding small; fix these great facts in your heart, and then up the steepest road you will walk with a firm step, and the coldest night-wind will neither shorten nor trouble your song.

Observe the expression, "Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth." The minister of God is to speak the words of God. A Biblical ministry must of necessity be the best ministry. It has been sometimes complained that such and such a sermon

was little more than a string of texts from beginning to end. If the texts were to the point, they would make a better statement of the truth and counsel of God than could be made by the polished sentences of the most eloquent Apollos. The deadly error into which we are apt to fall is that we must say something original, and the people are quite as much to blame as the ministers for this fatal mistake. They do not prize Scriptural teaching. They want to hear something fresh, racy, piquant, startling. They do not sit, Bible in hand, testing the speaker by the revelation; and what they ask for they get. They ask for chaff, and they get it; the great Biblical teacher is left with empty pews; his books sell slowly up to hundreds; whilst the vulgar declaimer, the savage bigot, or the frothy rhetorician, is king of the mob and the idol of book buyers. Let us honour the teacher who honours the Word of God. Hold him in reverence as one who thinks nothing of himself and everything of his Master. He may be unskilful in sentence-making, but his soul is aglow with the true fire, and if we make him our companion he will satisfy and gladden us with infinite riches.

The tenth verse is as remarkable as the ninth :—

“I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.”

So terrific is the power with which man is clothed by the Almighty! Every age, every country, has its supreme man; its man who stands nearest God, and gets the first hint of the divine will. He may, indeed, be despised, and have his prophecies thrown back upon him in mocking tones, yet none the less is he the minister of God. Others may be preferred before him, yet there he stands, the interpreter of a will that must prevail, the echo of a voice that must fill the universe with a sense of its authority. This verse sets forth under a personal figure the majesty and omnipotence of truth. It is not the mere man Jeremiah who is thus mighty even to terribleness; he is but representative and ministerial, and if he tamper with his mission he will be dispossessed and humbled. God never puts his own authority out of his own power. He never parts permanently with a single key from his girdle. He can scatter our riches, he can break



down our health, he can crumble away our boasted position ; in a word, he can mightily and wholly reclaim every gift his hand has given. Yet how he loves to incarnate his will ! How he loves to find a tabernacle for his infinitude, to dwell in a flaming bush, to abide in a broken heart ! “ Behold, I stand at the door, and knock : if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.” He gave Moses a rod ; he touched Isaiah’s lips ; he caused Ezekiel to see visions ; he moved Daniel by the spirit of interpretation ; yet were they only his servants, mighty in him, but without him they were as other men, poor and weak,

“ Moreover the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Jeremiah, what seest thou ? And I said, I see a rod of an almond tree. Then said the Lord unto me, Thou hast well seen : for I will hasten my word to perform it. And the word of the Lord came unto me the second time, saying, What seest thou ? And I said, I see a seething pot : and the face thereof is toward the north ” (vers. 11-13).

This power of spiritual vision is pre-eminently the gift of God. This power of parables, making them or reading them, is a deep mystery of the unseen kingdom. Is it not the gift of sight that distinguishes one man from another ? Isaiah saw the Lord seated upon his throne, high and lifted up ; Jeremiah saw a rod of an almond tree, and a seething pot whose face was towards the north ; Ezekiel saw a whirlwind and a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and out of the midst of the fire as the colour of amber ; Daniel had the knowledge and understanding and interpreting of dreams ; Amos saw the Lord standing upon a wall made by a plumb-line, with a plumb-line in his hand ; he saw also the grasshoppers in the latter growth after the king’s mowings, and through a basket of summer fruit he saw the nearness of the end of Israel ; Zechariah saw a man riding upon a red horse, standing among the myrtle trees, having behind him three red horses, speckled and white ; and Malachi saw from afar the messenger going swiftly forward to prepare the way of the Lord. “ The things that are not seen are eternal.” The prophet may truly say, “ I hear a voice they cannot hear ; I see a hand they cannot see.” How the earth and sky are rich with images which the poet’s eye alone can see ! What a parable is spring, and what a vision from the Lord is summer, laden with

all riches, gentle and hospitable beyond all parallel! O man, what seest thou? Launch out upon the sunny lake; with Pilatus in the rear and the Rigi in front, with a distant glimpse of the snowy Wetterhorn, with a thousand shadows playing upon the quiet waters—what seest thou? With the mountains girdling thee round, as if to shut thee up in prison, and suddenly opening to let thee through into larger liberties—what seest thou? I see beauty, order, strength, majesty, and infinite munificence of grace and loveliness.

Look at the moral world, and say what seest thou. Think of its sinfulness, its madness, its misery untold, its tumult and darkness and corruption, deep, manifold, and ever-increasing. Seest thou any hope? Is there any cure for disease so cruel, so deadly? What seest thou? I see a Cross, and one upon it like unto the Son of man, and in his weakness he is mighty, in his poverty he is rich, in his death is the infinite virtue of atonement. I see a Cross, and its head rises to heaven. I see a Cross, and on it is written, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin." I see a Cross stretching its arms outward from horizon to horizon, and from it there comes a voice saying, "Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die? Believe in me, and live for ever." The man who sees that Cross most clearly should proclaim its existence to others; and he who has most deeply felt its power should most loudly proclaim its excellence. Blind are they who do not see it. It fills all the widening circle of civilisation; its shadow is upon every cradle and upon every grave; it touches life at every point; it is the crook in every lot, yet it is the answer of every difficulty; yet it is the trouble of every soul that is corrupt, and the hope of every soul that yearns for pureness and liberty. Oh, blind are they who cannot read these signs of the times!

And far away in the distance, what seest thou? Across the seething sea of time, standing high above all earthly affairs, yet inseparably connected with them, what is that glistening and dazzling object? It is fairer than the sun when he shineth in the fulness of his strength, and marvellous is its fascination alike for the evil and the good: the evil look upon it until their knees

tremble and their bones melt like wax, and the good look unto it, and praise the Lord in a song of thankfulness and hope. What is it? It is a great white throne whence the living Judge sends out his just and final decrees; it is the hope of all who are good, it is the infinite terror of the heart that is bad.

The man who sees all these things clearly will be in his day as Jeremiah was in his. He will be the servant of the Lord, and he will speak boldly of things unseen; he will utter God's judgments touching wickedness, and he will be as a defenced city, and an iron pillar, and brazen walls against the whole land. And do you suppose that he will escape persecution and suffering? Will his word be quietly accepted, or devoutly received? Never; his life will be a battle, his bread will be begrudged, his familiar friends will become his enemies, and they who cannot strike him with a sword will annoy him with an anonymous pen. It is impossible for an honest prophet to escape persecution. "They hated me before they hated you; if they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you," are Christ's own keen clear words. What then? Shall we live in a quietness for which we have to pay our convictions? Shall we fear those who lift up arms against us? God forbid. "They shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee."

## Chapter ii. 6-8.

"Neither said they, Where is the Lord, that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, that led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought, and of the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt? And I brought you into a plentiful country, to eat the fruit thereof and the goodness thereof; but when ye entered, ye defiled my land, and made mine heritage an abomination. The priests said not, Where is the Lord? and they that handle the law knew me not: the pastors also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal, and walked after things that do not profit" (vers. 6-8).

### THREE SHAMEFUL POSSIBILITIES IN HUMAN LIFE.

THE second chapter of Jeremiah sets forth Almighty God as earnestly expostulating with his people. They had forgotten his mercies; they had trimmed their way so as to tempt idolatrous nations into alliance; they had not heeded the chastisements which were intended to bring them to repentance; and therefore God offers a remonstrance as tender as the appeal of a father, and, in the event of that failing to subdue the stubborn heart, he threatens to reject the confidences and to hinder the prosperity of Israel. Such is a general outline of the chapter. But following the order of the text, we are arrested by three considerations:

I. The possibility of dishonouring the great memories of life. "Neither said they, Where is the Lord, that brought us up out of the land of Egypt?" An event like that would fix itself in the memory for ever. Who could forget the Egyptian bondage, the sufferings, the groans, the horrors of a lifetime? Who could forget the joy of deliverance, the rapture, the ungovernable ecstasy of triumph? Yet ancient Israel was as little humbled and stimulated by divine mercy as if Egypt had never plagued it with intolerable oppressions. The dark night was forgotten, and Israel did not know who had lifted upon it the brightness and hope of morning.

The great memories of life are dishonoured (1) when the vividness of their recollection fades; (2) when their moral purpose is overlooked or misunderstood; (3) when their strengthening and stimulating function is suspended.

What would human life be without its hallowed memories? Man must have facts as well as hopes,—something to which he can go back with confidence; back to some place where he met God; to some bush that burned without being consumed; to some slaughtered lion, or overthrown giant of Gath; something about which he can say with confidence, God did this for me and it shall be holy to me for ever. There is, however, a possibility of forgetting sacred scenes, and of cheating the soul of reminiscences which ought to be a perpetual inspiration. The text says so; experience proves it. May we descend to every-day particulars? Let each man find the proofs in his own history: Sickness, Poverty, Danger, etc.

II. The possibility of under-estimating the interpositions of God. Look at the case in the text,—through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and pits, through a land of drought and of the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt. Viewed prospectively, men shrink from such difficulties; viewed retrospectively, a good many of the terrors are forgotten. In this description of the wilderness nothing is wanting to complete the horror,—deserts, pits, drought, solitude, shadow of death; yet through all God conducted them by the light of his mercy and the majesty of his power. That such an interposition could have been forgotten, or that the memory of it could have ceased to be operative for good in the soul, is a revolting illustration of human depravity. Granted that we have not the same outward difficulties, will any man deny that his moral pilgrimage is beset by many perils, and that the grave is constantly open at his feet? (Think of the training and defence of one human life, and multiply this by the number of lives in the world.)

Not only was the dark side of history forgotten, but the bright side was overlooked,—“I brought you into a plentiful country, to eat the fruit thereof and the goodness thereof.” What was the

result? Were they who had been preserved in the desert glad when they were brought into the garden? Did they erect the altar, and bow in long-continued prayer, and unite in the loud, sweet psalm of thankfulness? Hear the answer: "Ye defiled my land, and made mine heritage an abomination."

If we try our own lives by these historical disclosures, shall we shame Israel by our purity and love? Have we not been conducted through dangerous places? Has the voice of the wild beast not shaken us with alarm? Have we not trembled on the edge of the pit, and been sad in awful loneliness? Remember the Deliverer! On the other hand, have we not been led into a garden of delights, into a land of which it may be said, "It is a land of hills and valleys, and drinketh water of the rain of heaven: a land which the Lord thy God careth for: the eyes of the Lord thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year"? Remember the Giver!

III. The possibility of the leading minds of the Church being darkened and perverted.

"The priests said not, Where is the Lord? and they that handle the law knew me not: the pastors also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal, and walked after things that do not profit" (ver. 8).

The priests, the pastors, and the prophets, all out of the way! All this declension came, it would seem, after prosperity. They had made a mere convenience of God; they received the heritage, and wantonly defiled it; they were not ashamed to do iniquity in the light of day. In all ages there have, of necessity, been foremost men; men whose capacity, culture, and divine election have entitled them to leadership; men whom God himself has acknowledged as the guides of the people. How easy it is for such men to succumb in periods of general corruption is too evident from universal history. The leader is often but the adroit follower. When he should stand with a protest, and lift up his voice clearly, he too frequently worships the crowd and leaves truth to make its own way. What then? (1) Such men should watch themselves with constant jealousy; (2) Such men should never be forgotten by those who pray. Can there be a heavier indictment than this—"The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so"?



The most affecting of all subjects to contemplate is,—God grieved, God complaining! Would he complain without reason? Would he startle the universe for some trifling cause? He says, “Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate;” and again, “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the Lord hath spoken: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me.” It is as though he would take inanimate creation into his confidence, and replace his children by the works of his hands. It is the voice of lamentation; it is the lamentation of God! Hear him, moving as it were through the chambers of the worlds, and shaking the heavens by the utterances of his great grief,—“Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid.” Does not the distracted parent often pace his chamber in the darkness of night, and mourn bitterly the revolt of his first-born, sobbing and groaning under the sting of a thousand recollections which throng upon the heart? God, abandoned by his children, grieved and wounded by those upon whom he has poured the resources of his love, calls upon the heavens to be astonished, and upon the works of his hands to be horribly afraid! It is as the cry of one whose heart is breaking; his great deliverances have been forgotten; his heritage has been defiled; his power has been despised, and his mercy been treated as an empty sentiment; what if the throb of his great sorrow should send a shudder of distress through the heavens and the earth! Look at Calvary for the full expression of all this divine emotion. The horrible darkness and the bursting rock show the sympathy of nature. All this agony was suffered by Jesus Christ in consequence of our sins; “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes are we healed.”

“O thou who hast our sorrows borne,  
Help us to look on thee and mourn,  
On thee whom we have slain;  
Have pierced a thousand, thousand times,  
And by reiterated crimes  
Renewed thy mortal pain.”

Seeing that such pain was inflicted by sin, let us avoid it as the abominable thing which God hates.

## Chapter ii. 10, 11.

“For pass over the isles of Chittim, and see ; and send unto Kedar, and consider diligently, and see if there be such a thing. Hath a nation changed their gods, which are yet no gods ? but my people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit.”

### CHRISTIAN CONTROVERSY.

THE text may be put into other words, thus : “Go over to the islands of the Chittim, the isles and coast lands of the far west ; then go to Kedar, away in the eastern desert,—go from east to west,—and ask if any heathen land has given up its idols (gods that are no gods), and you will find that no such thing has ever taken place ; but whilst the heathen have kept to their gods as if they had real and strong love for them, my people, for whom I have done so much, whose names are on the palms of my hands, have turned away from me, and have given up their living and loving God for that which can do them no good.”

There must be some way of accounting for conduct so clearly unreasonable and ungrateful. We may perhaps find our way to the secret step by step, if we notice one or two things that we ourselves are in the habit of doing. If, for example, a man shall say that he has a book in his hand, we who see the book will at once agree with him that such is the fact ; but if he adds that it is a good book we shall wait until we have read it before we say anything about its value. Merely to say that it is a book is to secure unanimity ; but to say that it is a good book is to open the way for difference of opinion. So, also, if a man shall say that he will train a young sapling in such and such lines, we may admit that the work is easy, and that success will follow it in due time ; but if he adds that he will as surely train a child as he will train the young tree, we may point out to him that the one task is not so easy as the other, and we may feel sure that facts will soon prove the truth of what we say.

We see, then, that as a question rises in importance it rises also in difficulty, and as it rises in difficulty it opens the way for debate, and makes even ill-will between the debaters an easy possibility. It is in the light of such facts that we would first view the state of things shown in the text. We are told in the text that the heathen has not given up his god; that, find him where we may, in the far west or in the far east, he holds to his god (which is no god) with a firm hand. Quite so; let him have the full credit which is due to him for doing this, but do not overlook the fact that his god is not a god, for in that fact you may have the key of the whole secret. His god is made on a small scale,—it can be seen, it can be measured (in fancy, if not in reality), it can in many cases be pressed to the heart whose trust it has drawn out. It is, too, a god that will stand a good deal of patronage; and men like in some way (direct or indirect) to have their own god under their own care. But take away the stone, or the wood, or the sun, or the moon—whatever the god may be, and in its place put a thought, or a Spirit, and at once you create danger; you pass into that which is unseen,—so high, so wide, so deep, that no line can be laid upon it; and for a religion that looked so simple and so direct, you set up a religion that is ghostly and alarming! Tell the pagan that the true God is a Spirit whom no man has seen nor can see, that he fills all space and all time, and you will stun the man; and as his mind awakens, difficulties will crowd upon him, and new questions will bring new anxieties and tortures to a mind which, never having had a doubt, never really had a faith. The small god meant small difficulty, the infinite God means infinite difficulty. No words can tell all that is meant by his great name; where speech becomes dumb because it has come to the end of its mean wealth the music of God's eternity but begins; and where imagination falters, the cloud but begins to rise from God's infinity. Is it wonderful, then, that life should be harder in Zion than in Kedar, or that infinite mystery should be a heavy burden to finite strength?

If we can make it quite clear that as a subject rises in importance it rises in difficulty, we shall see one side of the text in a hopeful light; and therefore let us linger a moment on the

threshold of the great theme. You have no difficulty with your hand, but what trouble you have with your heart! Why? Because the heart is so much more than its servant the hand. Your words may be well under your control, but what bit and bridle can hold your thoughts in check! You can fit the yoke to the beast of burden, and by your will you can make it serve in the furrow; but that sweet child of yours, so fair, so bright, can wound, can break your heart! So it is through and through life. It is easy to be good at Kedar; it is hard sometimes to pray in Zion.

One more illustration will bring us to the subject. We all know how much easier it is to keep up the form of religion than to be true to its spirit. Say that religion is a number of things to be done, some at this hour and some at that, and you bring it, so to speak, within range of the hand, and make it manageable; but instead of doing this, show that religion means spiritual worship, a sanctified conscience, and a daily sacrifice of the will, and you at once invoke the severest resistance to its supremacy. Or say that religion simply means a passive acceptance of certain dogmas that can be fully expressed in words, which make no demand upon inquiry or sympathy, and you will awaken (if any) the least possible opposition; but make it a spiritual authority, a rigorous and incessant discipline imposed upon the whole life, and you will send a sword upon the earth, and enkindle a great fire.

Thus we come back to the same point; that is to say, to the doctrine that importance is the measure of difficulty in all departments and phases of life: the man of renown has more difficulty than the man of obscurity; the man who has deep convictions lives a harder life than the man who is careless about vital questions; horticulture is more difficult than sculpture; spiritual teaching is severer than physical training; the magician is applauded, the Redeemer is crucified; and, by the same great law, he who is God over all suffers more than all other gods. "Pass over the isles of the Chittim, and see; and send unto Kedar, and consider diligently, and see if there be such a thing. Hath a nation changed their gods, which are yet no gods? but

my people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit."

In view of these hints, and the whole line of thinking to which they belong, one cannot but regard hopefully all earnest and practical religious controversy, feeling that such controversy arises, as if by a kind of necessity, out of the very grandeur of the subject; out of the demands which religion makes upon the present life, as well as out of the splendid destinies which it offers to the contemplation and acceptance of mankind.

Earnest religious controversy seems to be but the higher aspect of another controversy which has vexed man through all time. The study of God is the higher side of the study of man. It is a singular thing that man has never been able to make himself quite out, though he has been zealously mindful of the doctrine that "the proper study of mankind is man." He wants to know exactly whence he came and what he is; but the voice which answers him is sometimes mocking, and nearly always doubtful. He is not sure whether his years can be numbered, or whether he has come down from immemorial time. His age puzzles him much. His choice lies between thousands and millions of years. He is sensitive on the question of time. Once he found a piece of pottery deeply buried at the mouth of the Nile, from which he inferred (not then knowing the history of Roman pottery) that he must be, say, a million years old; then he found out—like other old-china dupes—that the pottery had been turned off the lathe of some comparative modern, whereupon he grew young again, and became modest with a sense of relative juvenility. This modesty became him well, and would have bloomed long but for the disturbing fact that he found a flint hatchet in an out-of-the-way place; and thereupon he resumed his antiquity, and gloried in it in many expensive books. Nor has man been less troubled about his body. He has founded colleges upon it, and museums, and learned lectureships, and a profitable profession with many costly branches. He has taken himself to pieces, and written upon the dismembered parts some long hard words; he has made diagrams of himself, ghastly woodcuts, and blood-coloured pictures: and still he is a puzzle to himself; a puzzle in life

because he cannot tell how he came to live, a puzzle in sickness because he cannot tell how to get well again, a puzzle in death because he does not know whether so much antiquity should be inhumed or cremated. Once he was satisfied with the absurd physiology of the "Timæus" (for even Plato was not always divine), and then he laughed at the rude guesses of the Greek. A strange course has man passed through, take him body and soul together. His body! He sprang spontaneously out of the earth; he evolved; he developed; he began existence as a cellular tissue, and fell under infinite obligations to an ethereal fluid; and, in short, he can trace himself back to a "primordial form." When he meets a certain animal he is not quite sure which of them is expected to speak first, and suddenly his face brightens with celestial light, as if "the divinity" had "stirred within" him! His soul! According to one ancient (Heraclitus) it "mutated," according to another (Empedocles) it "compounded," another (Anaxagoras) called it *Nous*, another (Diogenes, not the cynic) called it *Air*, and Pythagoras pronounced it a Number and a Harmony,—a judgment in which nonsense is finely set to music. Now, we are not going to ask any questions as to the soundness or unsoundness of any of these theories; at some of them we may smile as at a child's antics, and some of them we may remit for further consideration; but looking at them simply as parts of a history, they would seem to establish the fact that man represents a special majesty and grandeur, that his secret is itself a glory, and that not to be able to answer this riddle is itself a tribute to the very powers that are baffled. So the doctrine returns—little importance means little interest, infinite importance means endless controversy.

Is it wonderful that man, who has had so much difficulty with himself, should have had proportionately greater difficulty with such a God as is revealed in the Bible? On the contrary, it will be found that the two studies—the study of man and the study of God—always go together, and that the ardour of the one determines the intensity of the other. In this view the text might read thus: Pass over the isles of the Chittim, and see; and send unto Kedar, and consider diligently, and see whether the inhabitants thereof have studied the physiology and chemistry of



their own bodies ; but the philosophers of Christendom have built themselves upon protoplasm. Kedar cared nothing about humanity, and therefore it cared nothing about divinity. When man is not deeply interested in himself it is not likely that he will be deeply interested in God. It will be found that every study that is keenly pursued has a strong effect upon the study that is immediately higher or otherwise greater than itself, as if no subject were self-terminating, but, contrariwise, part of some larger, though, it may be, imperfectly comprehended question. Thus political economy writes itself up to, and over the line which is supposed to separate it from, morals ; and the moralist encroaches upon theology that he may illuminate and justify his highest theories. Thus, in every way, the higher and the lower, the universal and the local, the eternal and the temporary, are in continual interaction, and there is always something beyond ! The individual fire seeks the universal sun ; love of home rises into love of country ; patriotism is a peak upon the vaster hill of philanthropy ; home missions are the root of foreign evangelisation—herein the afflicted Psalmist sang sweetly of Zion, “Thy servants take pleasure in her stones, and favour the dust thereof. So the heathen shall fear the name of the Lord.” It is the same law—the local spreading itself into the universal, the waves of the little sea rising and spreading until, in billow upon billow, they roll their foam upon the rocks of the Infinite.

In the doctrine that the very greatness of God is itself the occasion of religious controversy, and even of religious doubt and defective constancy, we find the best answer to a difficulty created by the words of the text. That difficulty may be put thus : If the people of Chittim and of Kedar are faithful to their gods, does it not prove that those gods have power to inspire and retain confidence ? and if the people of Israel are always turning away from their God, does it not show that their God is unable to keep his hold upon their occasional love ? Such a putting of the case would be valid if inquiry be limited to the letter. But if we go below the surface we must instantly strip it of all worth as a plea on behalf of idolatry. Clearly so ; for, not to go further, if it proves anything it proves too much ; thus—the marble statue which you prize so highly has never given you a moment's pain ;

your child has occasioned you days and nights of anxiety ; therefore a marble statue has more moral power (power to retain your admiration) than has a child. Your clock you understand thoroughly ; you can unmake and make it again, and explain its entire mechanism down to the finest point of its action ; but that child of yours is a mystery which seems to increase day by day : therefore you have more satisfaction in the clock than in the child. So the argument in favour of Kedar proves nothing, because it not only proves too much, but lands the reasoner in a practical absurdity.

So we return to the starting-point. We see the greatness of God troubling the nations as the ark of the testimony troubled the Philistines. Even when men pronounce God "inscrutable," they do not get rid of all uneasiness. It must always trouble a thoughtful man to have anything inscrutable pressing upon him and overlooking him. Yet even to say that God is "inscrutable," or that there is something "inscrutable" behind all force, is to be far enough from the old blank atheism. Such a creed admits of hopeful interpretation ; it limits human inquiry ; it humbles human pride ; it makes men silent,—and there is a silence which is akin to worship.

We cannot be unmindful of the fact that there is a controversy which is both immoral and unprofitable ; yet even this vicious and clamorous debate is traceable in some measure to the necessities of the case, for when a depraved heart interprets religion we may expect immorality, and when a depraved genius interprets theology we may expect unprofitableness. The apostle, writing his epistle to the Romans, says of some people, "they did not like to retain God in their knowledge," and to get rid of him they would probably indulge in wicked controversy. The text speaks of "that which doth not profit," and reminds us of the danger of taking up controversies without pith, substance, or spiritual nutriment in them. Unprofitable controversy has been the recreation of a certain order of mind—far from contemptible as to capacity and acuteness—from the very beginning of the world ; but we protest against the encouragement of such controversy in the Christian pulpit. One would imagine that some

ministers supposed themselves to be called of God to make as many mysteries as possible. No doubt it is quite within the range of the power of eccentric genius to turn the multiplication table itself into a metaphysical jungle, and to show by an endless use of unintelligible words how dangerous a thing it is to risk anything upon the seductive but malign proposition that two and two are four. Do you know how exciting it is to live next door to a young analytical chemist, and candidate for membership in a microscopical society? It is a serious trial. His calls are alarming visitations. He has just discovered that in the household water there is something like '09 per cent. of lead; he has looked at the household bread through a microscope, and he simply forbears to state what he has seen. Altogether, you feel, when he has gone, that he has made a considerable subtraction from your comfort, and sent a general sense of uneasiness through the family. It is much the same, with more serious results, in hearing unprofitable controversy in the pulpit. When it is all over, you have a confused impression that you have been somewhere up in the clouds, that you have heard words which, though it is quite lawful, it is absolutely impossible to repeat; you have, too, a feeling that the less you have to do with religion the better, that to believe it is to be mad, and that to deny it is to occupy an exciting position somewhere between respectability and wickedness. Against such controversy we protest. It is trifling with human life; it grieves the Spirit of God. Earnest controversy we would honour. Out of its friction light will come, and warmth. In its very vehemence and desperateness we would see the grandeur of a religion whose aspects are innumerable, and the fascination of a truth which is now like a star alone in the dark, and now like a sun which can fill all worlds with light.

The foundation of this argument is, that of all subjects that engage the human mind, religion (whether true or false) is the most exciting; that in proportion as it enlarges its claims, will it be likely to occasion controversy; and that, as the religion of the Bible enlarges its claims beyond all other religions, assailing the intellect, the conscience, the will, and bringing every thought and every imagination of the heart into subjection, and demanding the corroboration of spiritual faith by works that rise to the point

of self-crucifixion, the probability is that there will not only be a controversy between man and man as to its authority and beneficence, but also a controversy between man and God as to its acceptance ; and that out of this latter controversy will come the very defection complained of in the text, and will come also the vexatious human controversies which may really be but so many excuses for resisting the moral discipline of the Gospel. This is the whole argument. Specially is to be noted that the principal controversy is not between man and man, but between man and God ; our hearts are not loyal to our Maker ; his commandments are grievous to souls that love their ease. The God of grace, rich in all comfort and promise, we do not cast off. We want such a God. But the God of law, of purity, of judgment, terrible in wrath and not to be deceived by lies, our hearts can only receive with broken loyalty, loving him to-day, and grieving him to-morrow. It is in this sad fact that we find the only satisfactory explanation of the slowness of the spread of the Christian kingdom. We are sometimes told that as rocks take a long time to build, and forests a long time to grow, so the kingdom of heaven requires a long time for its establishment upon earth. That analogy we cannot accept. Where does God blame the rock because it does not rise more rapidly ? When did God rain fire and brimstone upon the forest because it was slow in growth ? On the other hand, God never ceases to blame men for not loving him. Jesus Christ takes up the same complaint, and mourns, even with broken-heartedness and many tears, that men will not come unto him for life. Not in rocks and forests can we find the answer to such a difficulty ; it is to be found in the heart itself, in the solemn and appalling fact that evil hates good, and resists it even unto the death. Everywhere you see this obstinate resistance. To say that the Christian religion cannot be true because it makes such slow progress in the world, is to say more than the speaker probably meant to affirm. It is to say that honesty cannot be good, or else it would be practised between man and man the world over ; purity cannot be good, or at the mention of it all evil would be abhorred ; temperance, candour, and good-will cannot be good, or they would instantly prevail wherever they have been made known. Evil hates goodness, hates light, hates God ; and as truth cannot

fight with carnal weapons, or force itself upon the world by physical means, it can only "stand at the door and knock," and mourn the slowness which it cannot accelerate. It is God's will that the rock grow slowly, and that the forest hasten not its maturity; but it is surely not the will of the Lord that his children should grieve him long, and provoke him to wrath through many generations.

We have been speaking of the controversy respecting the Unseen and Invisible God. There is a distinct effort made in our day to turn the controversy out of historical channels, and to fasten it upon abstract speculation. We must resist this effort, for we at all events believe that the discussion concerning essential Deity was started from a new centre when Jesus Christ came into the world. Still, when philosophers tell us that God is Unknowable, Unthinkable, Incognisable, and Inscrutable, we are bound to reply that they have only put into uncouth language what the Bible had already told us in simple words. They say God is inscrutable; the Bible says, "Who can by searching find out God?" They say God is incognisable; the Bible says, "No man can see God and live." They say God is unknowable; the Bible says, "No man hath seen God at any time, neither can see him." Here is the modern philosophy, four thousand years old and more! But the point to be insisted upon is this: As distinctively Christian teachers, not mere Deists, Theists, or natural theologians, but as believers in the Christian revelation, specifically so called and known, we are bound to look, not at a speculative Deity, but at the God made known to us by Jesus Christ. To the branch of the argument let us now turn.

Suppose a man should arise and make this claim on his own behalf, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father;" "As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father;" "I and my Father are one." The man would not be believed simply because he made the claim; perhaps, indeed, he would be stoned; perhaps he would be thought mad. If, however, we are at all interested in this speech—so novel, so startling—our first hope will be that from this man we may learn something about the Unknown God. We must listen further. How few men listen well,



—how few listen with the soul ! We must ask him questions. His character must be tried as by fire ; his life must be watched with jealousy cruel as the grave ; and every word he says must be stretched on the rack of a fearless criticism, for strait must be the gate and narrow the road to Godhood. No man must be allowed to vault the high barriers. Now it is only just to this man to say that this is the very test which he wishes to undergo. He does not thrust himself arbitrarily upon man ; he stands at the door and knocks ! Could the meanest servant do less ? When we cannot grasp all the meaning of his unfamiliar words—so much background have they, and so vast a perspective—he says, If you cannot yet understand or receive the word, believe me for the work's sake ; let my wonderful work done in your own home, or upon your own child, be as a telescope through which you may see the High and the Lofty One. Thus we are constrained to listen still ; and as we listen, sometimes we are quieted by a tender music ; sometimes we take up stones to stone him, because he says that God is his Father, making himself equal with God ; and sometimes, when we are weary, and he speaks of Rest, we are tempted to throw our arms around him, and cry upon his breast for very joy,—for it is rest we need, we are so tired and so weak.

But, mark, how we are likely to be loyal, because so far the advantage has been on our side. A very subtle deceit may delude us. Up to this point we have heard new words, seen wonderful works, and received a promise of Rest, and therefore we are prepared to be loyal. But wait ! The trial has yet to come. Now that we are healed and comforted with reviving rest, he says, “I must claim you, body and soul ; he that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me ; except a man deny himself and take up his cross daily, he cannot be my disciple.” So the religion to which Jesus Christ calls us is not a pleasant soporific, lulling us into dreamy repose, and filling the scented air with glittering fascinations ; it is a cross, a yoke, a discipline, a service ; it means continual sacrifice for the good of others ; it sends us into all the world to preach the Gospel to every creature ; it enjoins lowliness, patience, meekness, humbleness of mind, longsuffering, gentleness, and charity,—and at that



point a great controversy sets in ; from that time forth many of his disciples walk no more with him ; some say, "This is an hard saying : who can hear it ?" and all men exclaim, "Who then can be saved ?" You see, then, how the argument repeats itself. A small god, small controversy ; small claims, small opposition ; great claims, and mighty rebellion !

Why is it, then, that we do not wholly leave him, saying, "We will not have this man to reign over us" ? It is because he touches our life as no other power can touch it, and because our poor life requires to be so touched by reason of its many infirmities. Whether he be a sinner or not, one thing we know, and on that one thing we rest. We have known the pain of sin and the bitterness of sorrow ; we have lost our firstborn and seen Death at his very worst ; we have been driven into impassable paths, stripped, scourged, tormented ; we have been hungry, cold, friendless ; we have stolen away to the grave by night, and have had to grope for it in the dark, and then, when we have been blind with tears, and wild with grief not to be borne, then "never man spake like this man ;" and if in our grateful enthusiasm we have in return called him Lord and God, pardon us, for when you are in the same anguish you may commit the same crime.

Speaking from a controversial point of view, we have received this representative of God cautiously, and even with keen and hostile suspicion. And this advice we are prepared to give : Watch him, weigh his words, probe every deed that he does, sum up into one large exaggeration all the improbabilities arising out of his ancestry, birth, trade, obscurity ; tell him that such garb of flesh is unbecoming God ; mock him, that you may try his temper ; smite him, that you may test his dignity ; take him by surprise, that you may discover his resources ; question him with hard and delicate questions, that you may entangle him in his speech ; drive him out into the cold night, that you may prove his fortitude ; call him mad, say he has a devil, sell him for silver, crucify him, crucify him, and—the God that answereth by fire, let him be God !

No name given under heaven amongst men has occasioned,

and is now occasioning, so much controversy as the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Alas ! there is a controversy between our own hearts and him, but it is not now to that sad controversy we refer. Let us glory in the fact that no name can excite the nations as they are excited by the name of Jesus. In this respect it is better to live in Christendom than in Kedar. Men do not know what to make of Christ. Their best books leave the secret unsolved. They sell him, and afterwards go out and hang themselves ; they deny him, and then go out and weep bitterly ; they destroy the temple of his body, but he builds it again in three days. You cannot get rid of Christ : you exclude him from your schools by Act of Parliament, but he, passing through the midst of you, says, "Suffer me and the children to meet ; let the flowers see the sun ;" you find him in statute-books, in philanthropic institutions, in literature ; you find him now just as his disciples found him, in out-of-the-way places, doing out-of-the-way things ;—"they marvelled that he spake with the woman,"—the eternal marvel, the eternal hope ! He is speaking with the woman still ; speaking with her in India, in China, in islands far out upon the sea ; presently he will take up her children in his arms and bless them, and be himself as the child that is born unto every woman.

This leads us to remark that how strong soever Christianity may be in force and dignity of pure argument—and in that direction it has proved itself victorious on all fields—its mightiest force for good is in its vital and inexhaustible sympathy. Theology as a science no man will lightly underrate ; but the controversy in which we are engaged is more than a battle of science ; and there is probably no word which so fully expresses the infinite advantage of Christianity in the encounter as the word sympathy. Christianity can, of course, assume what we are pleased to call scientific forms, but no scientific form can hold all her truth and pathos any more than a bush could hold the infinity of the living God,—a ray unloosed to light a man to his great destiny. A science that distinguishes one attribute of God from another, that attempts to show where one ends and another begins, that determines their relationship and interdependence, that arbitrates in supposed controversies between Justice and

Mercy, that holds the light of critical explanation over mysteries which even Christ never attempted to illuminate,—a science that builds a house for God in some set form of words, and an habitation for the Eternal in prescribed formularies that can be duly enrolled in the High Court of Chancery, may, by the spell of genius and the wealth of learning, secure the attention and hold the confidence of educated men; but Christianity as a sympathetic religion, tender, hopeful, patient, with morning light for ever falling on its uplifted eyes, leaning with all its trust upon the Cross of the atoning Son of God, calling men from sin, ignorance, and death, is a figure the world will not willingly spare in its day of anguish and sore distress.

It will be interesting to observe how God himself meets the controversy which he deplures; for in doing so we may learn a method of reply. When God answers, his reply must be the best. Look at the divine challenge: "What iniquity have your fathers found in me, that they are gone far from me?" This sublime challenge you cannot find in all the sayings of heathen gods. And this is the invincible defence of the Christian religion in all ages and in all lands,—you have Purity at the centre, you have Holiness on the throne! It would be a comparatively easy task to collect from Greek and Roman history, and from other pagan sources, an array of charges against the gods themselves, that would show the pertinence and the justice of this high challenge.

The late Dr. Cotton, once Bishop of Calcutta, tells us, in one of his letters, of a youth whom he baptised, who gave as one of the reasons of his abandoning Hinduism, "the crimes of the gods"! "What iniquity have your fathers found in me? saith the Lord." The gods of Olympus considered themselves emancipated from the restraints of the moral law; they boasted their superior intellectual power, but cared not to conceal from men the tumult of their immorality. Amongst the Homeric gods we look in vain for courage, justice, prudence, temperance, or self-control. "What iniquity have your fathers found in me? saith the Lord." The Greek gave his god Titanic intellect, but left him without a rag of character. The Greek made his god immortal, but it was an immortal bacchanalian or an immortal debauchee. "What iniquity have your fathers found in me? saith the Lord."

And if the gods of pagan Rome were not the outcome of "an unbridled and irreverent fancy," the religion which they were supposed to patronise was perhaps the purest selfishness the world has ever seen. Hence it has been truly said, "Ancient Rome produced many heroes, but no saint." The pagan Romans often took their gods into their own hands, and scourged them in sheer spite. When Augustus saw that his fleet was wrecked, he virtually deposed Neptune by solemnly degrading the statue of that negligent god. When the young and illustrious Germanicus died, the people stoned the altars of the gods, because the gods had not spared the life of one who might have been king. The pagans are everywhere ridiculed by the fathers for satirising in the theatres the very gods they worshipped in the temples.

Those who have read Augustine's immortal work, "The City of God," will remember with what fierce eloquence he scourges the gods of pagan Rome. How biting his tone, how keen his retorts, how broad his sarcasm! "Why," he sternly demands, "did the gods publish no laws which might have guided their devotees to a virtuous life?" And again, "Did ever the walls of any of their temples echo to any such warning voice? I myself," he continues, "when I was a young man, used sometimes to go to sacrilegious entertainments and spectacles; I saw the priests raving in religious excitement, and before the couch of the mother of the gods there were sung productions so obscene and filthy for the ear that not even the mother of the foul-mouthed players themselves could have formed one of the audience." History, as you know, is full of such instances. Remembering these things, you may see the force of the inquiry, "What iniquity have your fathers found in me?" This is the invincible defence of the Christian religion to-day. If you make it an argument, and elaborate it as a philosophy, what is to hinder you carrying the battle to victory as a purely intellectual contest? But there is something more, which must not be overlooked by the Christian teacher. God is not only the High, but the Holy One; and those who seek him must seek him in spirit and in truth. The watchword of Christianity is, "Be ye holy as your Father in heaven is holy." Seek "holiness, without which no man can see the Lord"—so runs the Christian commandment.

Observe how Jesus Christ repeats the very challenge we find in the text,—“Which of you convinceth me of sin?” And, later on, “If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil.” They had accused him often, but had convicted him never! We apply this doctrine with timidity, for who would wilfully slay himself, or bring judgment upon a thousand men? Yet the application is this: When the Church is holy, the Christian controversy is ended in universal and immortal triumph! “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” When we can say, “What iniquity have ye found in us?” we may take down the war standard, for the fight has become victory. But if we bite and devour one another, if our good words be few and our bad words be many, if we live in clamour, in distrust, in bitterness,—what does it avail if with a strong logic we have a contradictory life?” “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.” “Be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord.” We put this weapon into the hands of young Christian soldiers as one which has never been bent or broken in any war,—the weapon of God’s holiness. When men puzzle you with high, bewildering arguments, say, *God is good*. When their words are long and hard, and they run your imperfect skill to earth in hot logical chase, say, *God is holy*. When they are violent, bitter, resolute in enmity, and inflamed with rage, say, *God is love*.

## Chapter ii. 14-37.

### ARGUMENTATIVE QUESTIONINGS.

THIS portion of the Book of Jeremiah is filled with penetrating questions. From the fourteenth verse to the end of the chapter inquiries are showered upon us. It would appear as if these verses were full of challenges and impeachments and accusations, subtly and delicately conveyed in the form of interrogation. Where there is not a positive statement made, there is a positive incrimination in the very form of the inquiry. These are what may be called argumentative questions. They are not inquiries asking simply which is the way, what is the hour of the day, what is the name of this or that individual or object,—innocent, pithless, all but needless inquiries: the questions are constructed upon a basis of argument and impeachment. What wonderful things can be done in a question! Is there any department of rhetoric or human utterance in which so much can be done with so little? It is difficult to print a question. Oftentimes the pith of the inquiry is in the tone of the inquirer. Here we are face to face with argumentative interrogations, and the interrogator is looking at us and looking into us and looking through us; it is a cross-examination of spears and darts and two-edged swords. In some places argumentative questions are deprecated; it is ruled by the authority of the occasion that such questions cannot be put, because they are too detailed and argumentative. In other places argumentative questions are constructed for the purpose of forcing the hand of those who for the time being hold the secret of policy and the destiny of empire; but the assemblies are very careful about the form in which the questions are put. Who shall challenge God's way of questioning? When he asks a question he pronounces a judgment; when he thrusts an interrogation upon an unwilling witness he delivers a verdict and a sentence.



Let us study the verses with these explanations in view. Take, for example, the fourteenth verse :—

“Is Israel a servant ? is he a homeborn slave ? why is he spoiled ?”

Is this a contemptuous inquiry?—Israel a servant, Israel a homeborn slave. Is there not scorn underlying the interrogation, as who should say, Thou art a worm, a thing to be crushed by the foot, or a servile thing to be made no account of by the Auditor of the universe ? Nothing of the kind. There is a tone of tenderness in this inquiry. In Bible times to be a homeborn slave was to be next the son of the family ; there was a domestic interest in such a slave, full of pathos, and the condition brought with it its own advantage and rights ; a slave born in the house took rank almost with the son, certainly immediately after the son ; and the Lord seems to say, Is not Israel a servant, a homeborn slave,—has he not rights at home, has he not domestic interests and family claims, a status which he can assert and maintain, and the fruit of which he is at liberty to enjoy ? Why then is he spoiled ; why has he thrown his inheritance away ; why does he not seize the possessions to which he is entitled, and live within the light and the security of the privilege which belongs to him in his domestic relations ? So there is no scorn in the word “homeborn slave.” The divine voice infused the pathos of emphasis into the word “homeborn.” Who can say “home” in a tone that is worthy of its music ? Surely only he who has made the universe a home for his creatures, and offered them the hospitality of his infinite love. God comes after us, and says, Are ye not mine ; do you not belong to my house ; are you not in the covenant of my love ; is not your name upon the record of my memory ; and goes not out after you all the solicitude of my heart ? Why then have you spoiled your destiny, perverted your way, gone in a forbidden course, and exposed yourselves to the paw and the teeth of the lion ? Thus may encouragement be the burden of an inquiry which at first looks severe and even contemptuous.

“The young lions roared upon him, and yelled, and they made his land waste : his cities are burned without inhabitants” (ver. 15).

That comes of going from home, leaving sacred discipline,

taking life into one's own hand, assuming the mastership of one's own fortune and destiny. Woe betide the man who goes beyond the bounds which God has fixed! Immediately outside those bounds the lion waits, or the plague, or the pestilence, or the pit hardly hidden but deep immeasurable. Luther said: Who would paint a picture of the present condition of the Church, let him paint a young woman in a wilderness or in some desert place; and round about her let him figure hungry lions whose eyes are glaring upon her and whose mouths are open to devour her substance and her beauty. Is the Church in a much better condition to-day? That is the natural condition of the Church. The Church always challenges the lion, tempts the devourer, excites the passions of evil men. When an evil generation tolerates the Church, applauds its dogmas, and flatters its ministry, it is because that Church has surrendered her prerogatives and trampled her functions in the dust. All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. That is not a historical statement limited chronologically; it is the eternal truth: wherever there is light it must fight the darkness; wherever there is holiness it must judge all evil, and make bad men afraid, and set them on the defensive, and extort from them the most vehement denunciations. Beware of a fictitious peace; beware of the flattery of bad men—it is because you are turning your eyes away from their false weights and scales and measuring-rods; it is because you wink when you pass by their revels and their orgies: it is because you are deaf when you hear their evil speeches and their cruel blasphemies. Know that the Church of the living God is alive, and is fulfilling her destiny, when all round about her are men more cruel than ravenous beasts. Israel, the homeborn slave, who ought to have walked arm-in-arm with the son of the house, left the precincts of the family and plunged into the way of lions.

In the seventeenth verse is another illustrative instance:—

“Hast thou not procured this unto thyself, in that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God, when he led thee by the way?”

Ah, that is the point of the sword! Is not all ruin suicide? To be murdered must indeed be awful, but to have put the knife to one's own heart, to have torn down the divine image

from the human soul, to have choked the throat that was praying, or to have forced out the prayer by some profanity, and to know at the end that this is our own doing,—surely this will bow down a man in the day of judgment, will bitterly and heavily afflict him in the hour of self-examination: he will not be able to say, See what a rent this dagger made, or what a thrust was given by that cruel hand; he cannot point to the gashes upon him and trace them to spears of enemies: when he looks upon his whole condition he will be compelled to say—I did it; this is my work; this is the fruit of my own sin; this comes of the policy that has in it no element of godliness and no gleam of virtue. Is there not a cause? Are not things related? Do not events belong to one another by primary and secondary sequences, often difficult to trace in all their outgoings and contact with the rest of this mystery which we call life? Do not our dead selves spring up in sudden and frightful resurrection when we least expected the reappearance? Does not the spectre come to the feast and sit down at the right hand and make the right side cold? or sit immediately opposite and dare us to drink the foaming wine and enjoy the sweet viands? Is there not a cause? Can a man sow, and not reap? Can a man fight against God, and be at peace with the universe? Can a planet detach itself from its centre and create an action of its own that shall be in rhythm with the march of the heavens? The suicide cannot be hidden; the blood marks cannot be obliterated.

“And now what hast thou to do in the way of Egypt, to drink the waters of Sihor? or what hast thou to do in the way of Assyria, to drink the waters of the river?” (ver. 18).

The rivers stand in Hebrew poetry for the places: “Sihor” means the muddy, turbid stream; and the geographical reference is to the Nile; and the river is called such by pre-eminence, as if there could be no other river—as if the Euphrates swallowed up all other streams, and it were enough to say “the river.” The question is this: What hast thou, Israel, Church of God, child of God, to do with the Nile and the Euphrates,—with false alliances, with forbidden compacts, with interchanges that cannot but be evil in their issue as they are evil and prohibited in their origin? “Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith

the Lord," would seem to be the command which runs through the whole of the Biblical economy. This is very hard discipline. Do we not often find the merriest laugh where we find the least religion? Is it not often pleasant to sit by the fireside where no prayer is ever offered? Is there not a rough liberty in associating with men in whose language there is no discipline and in whose policy there is no limitation of virtue? Is there not a temptation to the young Christian to sit up beyond the prescribed hours? Is it not delightful to mingle a little worldliness with a little piety—to clip off the edges of the Sabbath or to mingle the Sabbath with the common week? The voice peals down from the place of judgment, What have you to do with idols, with worldly policies, with selfish designs? Why build your houses on the banks of the Sihor? or why bring the Euphrates within the outlook of your habitation? It would seem that God insists upon separation, distinction between the Church and the world in an unmistakable way,—call it Puritanism, call it fanaticism, look upon it as illiberality and narrow-mindedness, still it is impossible to read the Bible without feeling that everywhere men who love God are called upon to separate themselves from those who do not love him—in no sense of Pharisaic pride or stiffness or self-righteousness, but in the sense of a vital difference: Christ and Belial cannot be reconciled in one brotherhood, and where the ark of the Lord is shut up with Dagon, Dagon must go down; they cannot subsist together.

Apply this to life, and who can live? Nevertheless, we must not lower the standard. Although we cannot always so control circumstances as to realise an ideal character, yet the ideal itself must be held up and magnified, and nothing must be allowed to becloud the glory of that idealism. But were it to be applied to life, the city would be revolutionised, houses of business would be opened no more, commerce would be driven into the sea and be buried in unpitied oblivion. The city is full of plagues. Life is thick-sown with snares and gins and traps. Our prayers have in them an accent of worldliness; our adoration sometimes furtively turns its eyes away from the uplifted majesty and throne of heaven, and fixes its longing gaze on trees forbidden and fields proscribed. Who can live? "Hold

thou me up, and I shall be safe:" forbid that I should lower my ideal in order to excuse my shortcomings.

Now comes a solemn appeal—a repetition, indeed, of what is given in the seventeenth verse—

"Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee: know therefore and see that it is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God, and that my fear is not in thee, saith the Lord God of hosts" (ver. 19).

This is the appeal of experience. In detailing the so-called evidences of Christianity, never forget how much experience contributes towards the illumination of difficult doctrine and high demand. "Thine own wickedness shall correct thee"—shall show thee how far thou hast got wrong: the devil himself shall turn round upon thee, and false to face shall laugh at thee as a fool. Surely that is the hardest lot of all! He came to us like a white angel, clothed with light, and accommodated his voice to our hearing, and spoke to us musically and fascinatingly, and promised us life, liberty, almost godhead; we put out our hands, and took the forbidden fruit, and he lured us away mile after mile, and when he got us safely into stony places, where the great rocks frowned upon us and the hollow caverns seemed filled with sounds of mockery, he then broke out into a broad never-to-be-forgotten laugh of mockery, and told us we were fools! We know it. No man ever yet was honest to himself after doing that which was evil without saying that he had committed two evils: he had forsaken the right, and done the wrong; he had given up the fountain, and made himself a leaking cistern; he had turned away from the light, and had been condemned to carry the burden of darkness. Let the heart speak; let real life-experience be called into the witness-box, and be sworn on this matter. What comes of vice? The answer is, Hell! That is the universal answer: it is not a reply which admits of modification; but when reality takes the place of fiction, it shall be said again and again, "The wages of sin is death." No man can leave God, and live. "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me." To turn away from him who is the living One is to turn to death.



We read that Israel had become a "degenerate plant." The Lord says :—

"Yet I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed : how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto me?" (ver. 21).

We must be careful how we understand these words. They have no relation whatever to the parable of the tares and the wheat. This is not the true vine standing side by side with the degenerate vine ; it is a vine which God planted that has itself gone down in quality ; this is not association, which cannot always be helped ; it is deterioration, an internal act, so that virtue goes out, and all healthfulness disappears, until there is no soundness in us ; there is a reversion to type, to original depravity and wildness, a depletion of human nature. It will be something to understand this in its practical and experimental aspects. Men are sometimes compelled to sit side by side with those who are morally inferior to them ; society is so constructed that we cannot always choose our own companions and associations ; in such case we have an illustration of what is meant by the mixture of tares and wheat ; the wheat had not deteriorated in value, nor had the tares improved in value, but they stood there together in the same field without relation, by-and-by to be separated from one another, the wheat to be garnered for the Master's use, and the tares to be burned with unquenchable fire ; but the text points to deterioration ; it is the actual vine itself that has gone down. Have we not noticed this in one another ? A mysterious action is this of spiritual deterioration. It does not set in with obvious energy all at once, so that in one short week a man ceases to be a healthy and fruit-bearing vine ; but little by little he goes down, his tone changes, his prayers are depleted of elements that once made them rich with spiritual significance ; a carelessness comes upon all his personal discipline ; we say, he is no longer the man he once was ; then he falls again, and still farther he goes down, until at last we begin to be ashamed of his society, or to say that we never come near him without being chilled : once he was so warm, so cordial, so affectionate, so spiritually-minded, that to touch him was to receive virtue ; but now all is changed, his talk has fallen to a lower level, and there comes now and then a look into his face which



means that the better self is being displaced by another identity. "What I say unto one," said Christ, "I say unto all, Watch." Let us be careful lest whilst we slumber the enemy take an advantage over us.

The questions still roll on, the interrogations fall from heaven with crushing power, the most mocking of all we find in the twenty-eighth verse: "Where are thy gods that thou hast made thee?" The Lord said in the twenty-seventh verse, "In the time of their trouble they will say, Arise, and save us;" the cowards will yet come back again; they who have mocked me shall pray to me: but I will say to them in their prostration, "Where are thy gods that thou hast made thee?" That is the attribute of a false god, that he always forsakes his worshippers in trouble. What will our gods do for us if their names be Money, Fortune, Fame, Popularity, Luck, Chance, Success, Selfishness? They will not bear the stress of hard weather; they have no objection to laugh with us in a sunny hour, but they are useless when the wind blows from all the points of the compass, and the horizon charges itself with threatening thunders. Only truth can stand all tempests and all judgment. Christ says he will be with us even unto the end of the world; the sacred voice of the unseen Comforter says, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee." The characteristic of idols is that they fall away when they are most wanted; the characteristic of Christ is that he is nearest to us when we need him most. Who can abide the day of the divine mockery? Who can stand before divine contempt? Surely there is no passage so terrible in all Holy Writ as the one which says that God will laugh at the calamity of the wicked, and mock when their fear cometh. These are words that bear no paraphrase; they affright us; they overwhelm us; they extort from us the cry, My soul, come not thou into that secret!

Finally, it is good for us to hear the divine questioning; it is healthy for us to submit ourselves quietly to the criticism of God. He will not ask questions that he can avoid asking that would give us pain or afflict us with humiliation; when he comes with the surgical knife it is that he may only amputate that which is mortified or useless; when he sits in judgment upon us it is only

that he may take away the dross; when he burns us it is that he may test the gold of our nature and prove our quality. The questions are not always in words; the divine inquiries may be in events, in those mysterious occurrences which we designate by the name of Providence: the child is taken away, and the bereavement is a question; the property is all gone so that the rich man becomes poor, and the poverty is an inquiry; all the stratagem, and wit, and cunning, and skill of the old energetic time forsake the fruitful, fertile mind, so that he who was wise in counsel is dumb and without resource, and his speechlessness, his infertility of mind, is a question. A man should puncture himself with many a "Why is this?" "How is this?" The more we examine ourselves the less God will have to examine us. Spare not the judicial interrogation; it may bring a hopeful death—the death which precedes true life. When God asks us questions, may we be able to hide ourselves in Christ. His Cross is the answer to the questionings of the law. His righteousness is the answer to the impeachment of outraged virtue. His sacrifice is the answer to sin. His priesthood is the reply to Satan.

## Chapter ii. 31-37.

"O generation, see ye the word of the Lord. Have I been a wilderness unto Israel? a land of darkness? wherefore say my people, We are lords; we will come no more unto thee? Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? yet my people have forgotten me days without number. Why trimmest thou thy way to seek love? therefore hast thou also taught the wicked ones thy ways. Also in thy skirts is found the blood of the souls of the poor innocents: I have not found it by secret search, but upon all these. Yet thou sayest, Because I am innocent, surely his anger shall turn from me. Behold, I will plead with thee, because thou sayest, I have not sinned. Why gaddest thou about so much to change thy way? thou also shalt be ashamed of Egypt, as thou wast ashamed of Assyria. Yea, thou shalt go forth from him, and thine hands upon thine head: for the Lord hath rejected thy confidences, and thou shalt not prosper in them."

### DIVINE QUESTIONS.

THIS appeal was addressed to the men who were immediately round about the prophet. It was therefore direct, personal, and was to be answered by the living voice. This is the kind of preaching we do not like. This preaching would empty any church in the world! Yet it is the only preaching that is worthy of attention. It is in vain that we refer to ancient history if we cannot apply it to modern instances. We are trifling with ourselves—that is to say, with our souls—if we think only of truths that are abstract and without immediate application to our own condition. The prophets thus spake to the men that were near at hand. In a sense, they seemed to arrest those men, and put questions to them. Surely, if we will not allow others to arrest us, we ought to arrest ourselves, and put down plain answers to plain questions, without hurry, or din, or noise; and we ought to take both plain question and plain answer into religious solitude, and look at them until we burn with shame, renouncing every plea of self-excuse, and accepting the divine judgment as divine righteousness: then will come healing, then

we shall get at the bottom of things, and be real : the cure is not from without, it is from above, and goes immediately to the core and root of all human wrong.

The people were required to answer two questions : "Have I been a wilderness unto Israel ? have I been a land of darkness unto Israel ?" Speak out. If God is chargeable with wrong, say so. Put your finger directly upon his errors, and say in plain terms, God is responsible for this : these are not human slips—trifling, petty mistakes, but the miscarriages of justice, the perversions of providence, the mistakes of God. Let us have plain language all round. We may lose ourselves if we begin to multiply words indefinitely. The question is—"Have I been a wilderness unto Israel ?"—have I pinched and starved my people ? have I led them amongst stony places ? have I been inhospitable to the lives that looked to me for bread and security and nourishment ? Say so, if it be so. "Have I been a land of darkness ?"—have I plunged Israel into night unlighted by a star ? have I been cold, pitiless, cruel ? If you have an impeachment to bring even against God, do not fear to bring it. He asks for it. Tell him when you have finished the infinite accusation that you have written at his bidding, and there is your indictment against his throne. A wondrous tenderness inspires the inquiry. It seems, indeed, to bring its own answer with it. There are some questions that are also replies : for the very tone in which they are put signifies the only possible answer that is correct. So the father might plead with his child—"Have I been a wilderness unto thee, or a land of darkness ? have I been deaf to entreaty ? have I been without sympathy in the time of affliction ? have I but half-opened the door when you have sought to return to my love and my confidence ?" The very inquiry is a defence ; the very method of the inquiry means, It is impossible to answer this but in one way. Why not put this question to ourselves ? Why not answer it in our mother tongue ? We should indeed be writing our own judgment, and sentencing ourselves to deserved penal servitude. But it is always well to be true, to come at the whole truth, in all its roundness : it is painful at the time, it seems to rend a man in twain when he has to tell all the truth ; but it is a rending that means reconstruction, salvation,

health, growth, and progress evermore. But who can tell the whole truth? It can be told in letters without always being told in spirit; or the words of confession can themselves be so pronounced as to take out of them all that is essential to true acknowledgment of sin. Why do we play the fool with ourselves, and by dividing ourselves cheat ourselves,—by saying one thing to the understanding, and another to the imagination, a third thing to conscience, and a fourth to appetite and desire? Self-analysis, and telling the truth to oneself, may be said to be the beginning of reformation and the very pledge and seal of a lofty, noble life.

Having answered a question respecting God, they have next to answer a question respecting themselves: "Wherefore say my people, We are lords; we will come no more unto thee?" Literally, why do my people say, We will rove at will. That is licence, not liberty? They have lost the centre, and are plunging evermore in chaos, without being able to give an account of themselves or to use what benefit might lie within their power. Why this new cry—namely, We will do as we like? Why this so-called freethought? why this progress which means running round and round and never advancing by one measurable inch? How very early men begin to be free thinkers! How soon sin says to a man, Rove at will; do what you like: you are a man! Then the poor fool thinks he *is* a man, and begins to "play fantastic tricks before high heaven." He forgets that we have only liberty to obey. He ignores the metaphysics of the case, and blunders day by day amid its bewildering accidents. The reality of the case as between man and God is simply this: God is Creator, man is creature,—what is the duty of the creature to the Creator but to wait upon him, to ask his will, to say in his own tones, Father, teach me everything: the universe is very great, and I am very little: thy sea is very large, my body is very small: the darkness comes down quite suddenly, and I cannot make the most even of the light, because when it comes for a long time it dazzles and blinds me so that more than half my time is not at my disposal for high uses even if I could so employ it,—Lord, father-mother, gentle One, guide me in every thought and word and action all the day, and take care of me

when I cannot take care of myself, even pretendedly, during the hours of unconsciousness, and thus feed me, lead me, guide me, O thou great Jehovah !

Then the Lord seems to adopt a kind of taunting tone :—

“Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire ? yet my people have forgotten me days without number” (ver. 32).

Our very memory is a mystery. Analyse your own powers of recollection, and see what a contradiction you are to yourself. For some things you have the most comprehensive and tenacious memory, and your friends say you forget nothing. In another direction you have no memory at all. Hence we find persons saying oftentimes—I shall forget my own name soon : I have no memory for names or places. As for dates, says another, I cannot recollect a single date in the whole calendar of history. Memory is not one faculty, operating in one direction : it may be great, and it may be small,—comprehensive, and contracted. Herein we are not at liberty to judge one another. A man is a mystery to himself in many instances even in this matter of recollection. The Lord puts it with fine point and most vivid energy when he says, “Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire ?” When did either of them forget a pin, a jewel, a toy, a feather ? What a memory for little things, for dressing, for adornment, for fashion, for outgoing, for public excitement ! What a recollection for dates, when the date is filled up with an amusement, an excitement, a new sensation ! Then how the memory burns ! But no memory for sacrifice, for prayer, for holy sacrament, for consecrated day, for revelations from heaven,—a memory that will hold all the fiction that ever was written, but a memory like a sieve in respect of everything that is written in the Bible ! What a voice is the Lord’s ! How strident, how crashing, how mocking ! how tender, beseeching, importunate, full of moaning and lamentation ! “My people have forgotten me days without number.” Could the complaint have been stated more pensively ? The very voice in which it is uttered adds to the poignancy of the distress. Who likes to be forgotten ? Mark the negative charge. It is not, have rebelled against me, have insulted me, have defied me ; but, “have forgotten me days without number.” Who



likes to be the one member of the family for whom no flower is brought, for whose birthday no provision is made, for whose little wants, or great, no one cares? There may be no studied insult of an intentional kind; but this daily forgetfulness makes life a dreary blank. Who does not like to be remembered even by the gift of a field-flower, or a smile, or a hand-shake, or some sweet epistle of loving regard? God complains of being forgotten,—not once or twice, but “days without number.”

Now the voice changes, and the element of accusation enters into it very sharply:—

“Why trimmest thou thy way to seek love? therefore hast thou also taught the wicked ones thy ways” (ver. 33).

The professed change for the better was really a change for the worse. Why this partial amendment? why this patched old coat? why these local reforms? Yet men are mightily fascinated by these, because while they afford some scope to ingenuity they lay no particular burden upon conscience. There are many persons in all ages who are prepared to go a certain distance, but no farther in the way of justice and purity and right; instantly they acknowledge that something should be done. The Lord says, “Why trimmest thou thy way to seek love?”—why this continual invention in incidental reforms? why not go to the root of the matter? why not lay the axe to the root of the tree? A corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit. It is useless to paint the branches, or hang bird-cages upon them, or tie to them fruit gathered from other orchards. Down with the tree, up with the roots, burn them, and in its place let there be a tree of the Lord’s right-hand planting. But all this trimming and adaptation and partial reform indicates a species of ingenuity and cleverness—“therefore hast thou also taught the wicked ones thy ways.” The substantive is feminine—“therefore hast thou also taught wicked women thy ways:” you have been inventive, you have issued new programmes of evil; you have said in effect: See how clever we are: here is a new method of profanity, here a novelty in blasphemy, here a cloak that baffles scrutiny, here an impervious garment—waterproof and fireproof, deluge and lightning cannot get through this covering; here is a darkness the moon never shines upon; here is a place unknown to every

one but the prince of devils. No doubt there is a great deal of ingenuity in wickedness. Bad men are not intellectually fools. They have wonderful sagacity in some cases, great mental penetration, and quite a striking method of doing their own work in their own way; they are inventive, mentally fertile; as to their fecundity in the way of devising evil methods and evil practices, it is immeasurable. But God knows it, and founds a charge upon it.

Mark the hardening process of sin as referred to in the thirty-fourth verse:—

“Also in thy skirts is found the blood of the souls of the poor innocents: I have not found it by secret search, but upon all these.”

The blood of the prophets was found in the skirts of those who had slain the good men. But “in thy skirts,”—is not that a term which indicates concealment? God says: I have not found out this blood, or the sin with which it is connected, by secret search—by digging down and finding a hole in the wall, as the prophet Ezekiel found a hole in the wall and entered into the chamber of imagery; this is not a cellarful of blood; this sin is not confined to the basement of the life-house: you have advanced beyond that. Cain, who introduced social sin into the world, performed his murder in secret, wiped his lips, and stood before God as an innocent man. We have made advances upon that infantile crime. Now our crime is public. We need not dig for it, or adopt a method of secret search: it is written on the front of the house, on the largest pane of the largest window; we have inscribed our houses with evil names, and we have not blushed in the face of heaven. The word comes too late to some, but it may be a seasonable word to others. The sin which you are half afraid of to-day, you will make a boon companion of before very long. The words you now use with blushing and trembling of voice, you will use familiarly by continued practice. There will be no need to send out a long line of experienced detectives to find out whether you are wrong; you will write the wrong upon your frontlets, and wear the seal of iniquity upon your shoulders; and your tongue, once used to childlike prayer, will speak bold blasphemy with familiarity which may make others tremble. We cannot rest at a certain point, saying,

I will go no farther than this. Such may be our intention at the time being, but we subtly and imperceptibly advance until we become adept in evil.

"Why gaddest thou about so much to change thy way? thou also shalt be ashamed of Egypt, as thou wast ashamed of Assyria" (ver. 36).

Literally, Why all these shifting policies? why all these new alliances? why be performing a kind of moral conjuring? The bad man gads about, or walks about, from place to place, saying, "Where shall I settle next? what communion shall I take up with now? what novelty is there in the town to-day? Is there any new church built that I can go to, until I make the place too hot for myself by neglecting its institutions and turning my back upon its appeals? Is there anything new in Egypt? I am tired of Babylon: I lived a long time in Assyria, and now I have cast all that off, and I am looking in Egyptian directions for new alliances and new hopes." Is this only an ancient experience? Is it not a clear and simple reading of to-day's purpose and action? Are there not many people who are all things by turns and nothing long—men who are wanting in conviction and thorough persuasion of soul, incapable of enthusiasm, driven about by every wind of doctrine; men who have called at all the hovels of heresy, and have never settled in the sanctuary of truth? We need not alter the terms; they are simple as our best-known mother tongue, and they will stand for the purposes of scrutiny all the while, not needing change or modification. Be something. Belong to somebody. Do not mistake roving at will for a safe dwelling at home. No Christian teacher will say, You must be this rather than that, so far as ecclesiastical relations are concerned; but every Christian teacher will say, Take advice: consider: come to conclusions, and be steadfast: prove all things; hold fast that which is good; in understanding be no more children, but be men.

What was the result of this trimming and gadding about, this changing between Assyria and Egypt?

"Yea, thou shalt go forth from him, and thine hands upon thine head: for the Lord hath rejected thy confidences, and thou shall not prosper in them" (ver. 37).

Observe the expression—"Thine hands upon thine head." It was

the Oriental sign of dejection and despair. Seeing a man in that attitude, the meaning was : He has no more hope ; his spirit is full of chagrin ; he has been utterly disappointed, and his soul is dead within him ; and his confidences are all battered down ; the day of prosperity, even nominal and superficial, is gone for ever. There are many confidences, and they look well. What can look better from the outside than wealth—golden wealth : the foundations silver, the gates made of precious stones, the front of the house gleaming white marble, the roof of the house one sheet of gold ; and behind horses and chariots, and manservants and maidservants, and a retinue endless ? What can look better as a confidence than health—rude health, rosy-cheeked health, bright-eyed health : the voice as sound as a bell, the arm as strong as iron, a strength that never knew what it was to be weary—real genuine health of blood and bone and sinew and skin ; a man whom death dare not touch ? Or the confidence of invention—that fertility of mind which always has a new shift, which can always see a back door out of every difficulty ? Or pleasure—sunny, merry, dancing pleasure, with a tune for every hour of the day, and as happy in the night season as in the daytime ; bells ringing the whole four-and-twenty hours round ; and as for laughter and joke and all kinds of mirthfulness, why here they are ? “The Lord hath rejected thy confidences.” One bolt of lightning, and the whole gold-house has gone down. One chill some damp night, and the health-house is ruined from attic to basement. One touch by the invisible hand, and the brain that had in it a thousand inventions trembles, and cannot remember. One keen disappointment, and pleasure is struck dead ; its face is an annoyance, its rattle is an insult, its invitations are blasphemies, in face of a woe so terrible. There is but one abiding confidence—“Rock of Ages, cleft for me.” There is but one refuge from the storm—“Jesus, refuge of my soul. There is but one mountain that cannot be burned down—“The mountain of the Lord.” There is but one house that outlasts the tempest, and is but the fairer for the stormings which have raved across its roofs and poured down their floods upon it—and that is the house of the living God. “What time I am afraid, I will trust in God.” “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

After all, having been in the houses we have mentioned, either as owners or as visitors—the houses of wealth, health, invention, pleasure,—we can now say soberly, with the quietness of unalterable conviction, There is only one altar that can be trusted—the altar of the living God—the Cross of God's own Son. Let us renounce our false confidences, put away our new tricks, and come straight back to the eternal thought—the love which was before the foundations of the earth. Men will continue to be betrayed by novelties; but at the last they will say, The novelties were in vain. There are those who are speaking from other books than the Bible; and they are intellectual men, able men; they are persons who are capable of treating great subjects in a great manner; they have turned away from Moses and the prophets, from the minstrels and the evangelists of the Bible, and have taken up with new sensations and new manners: but “the word of the Lord abideth for ever;” it says concerning these men, “‘They have forgotten me days without number;’ but in some night of storm, in some stress of weather, bitten by some tremendous wolf amid the snows of the new lands they have sought, they will come back to me; and I am a forgiving book, I will open on the page on which it is written, ‘Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.’”

## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, in the day of battle thou art a shield and buckler, in our great fear and in our last distress thou art as a shining light and a delivering hand; and when we come to the last river, broad and black and cold, thou dost speak to it, and the waters separate, and we pass through as on dry land. Thou hast not neglected our life either here or there; in its strongest hour thou hast taught it to pray, in its utmost weakness thou hast taught it to hope, and when the last scene of all has come, the farewell, thou hast then been near at hand to speak kind words, old gospels in new tones, reviving the heart, establishing and assuring the faith. When we were a-hungred thou didst find bread for us in unexpected places; under thy blessing flowers arise in the wilderness and great stretches of green pasture in the desert, yea, and water springs for us out of the rock, and honey is found where man never found it before. So then thou dost cover our whole life with thy care, thy Spirit provides for every want, answers every question, accompanies us through every step, nor leaves us until our weary wandering feet stand on the safe side of the river. All this knowledge comes to us in Christ, and through Christ, and for Christ's sake. This is his sweet Gospel, his delivering word, his message of emancipation, his good tidings of great joy. Enable us now to find our sufficiency in God and not in ourselves, and under all stresses, perils, and agonies of life may we hear a word behind us and round about us, and in us, coming from every quarter of heaven itself, mighty as thunder, gentle as the breeze that injures not the weakest flower, full of music, full of strength, My grace is sufficient for thee. Amen.

## Chapter iii.

### CONTENDING EMOTIONS.

WE often speak about contending emotions. We do not know certainly whether the love or the wrath will overcome at the last. We burn with anger, and then we are melted with pity; we denounce and repel, and then in some sudden inspiration not human we hold out the sceptre and bid the alien return. We need not go beyond the range of our own consciousness to verify all this marvellous play of emotion. We are not



the same in the evening we were in the morning: sometimes we sleep off our anger and awake radiant with benignity; then the sudden thought of ill-usage returns, and we frown again, and our forehead is clothed with denser clouds. Such is the panorama of emotion—its marvellous colour, its changing energy, its variant tone. All this we find on the widest scale in the Book of God. How God's method changes! He will destroy, and yet he will not hurt; he offers men great blessing, and on their ill-behaviour he suspends, if not withdraws, the offer; he is clothed with judgment, yet his mercy abideth for ever. Here we find the harmony of contraries. All this is needful, in order that our own consciousness may be covered and satisfied by the revelation of God's person and government. We understand all the action and interaction:—when God is angry and when he is grieved; when he sorrows and when he beams with complacency upon those who have returned in humbleness to seek his pardon and to kiss his hand. We need not travel the whole Biblical space in illustration and confirmation of this, for we have here, as in a little Bible, all the ups and downs, all the dark thunder and all the vivid lightning, all the tender music, all the wrestling love, all thunder-crowned Sinai, and all blood-besprinkled Calvary, within the few lines which constitute the parable of this chapter. A wonderful structure is the Bible: sometimes it runs itself altogether into one little chapter, so that we may see its whole purpose at a glance; now it bewilders; now it is too profound for us, and we dare not plunge into its mysterious depths; and now it is higher than heaven, what can we do? and now it is brighter than the white flame of mid-day, who can look at its dazzling glory? and then it tabernacles itself in some brief sentences, attempts itself, atmospheres itself, and comes within our own condition, so that we may look at it whilst it looks at us, and study it, and reply to its appeals, and make acquaintance with its mystery of judgment and its mystery of gospel. To this chapter we may come with the high expectation of finding in it the whole gamut of divine emotion.

God tells us why there are difficulties in our culture and experience of nature. The sentence is a bold one, and he would

be a bold man who would read it to-day loudly. Yet so must we read it:—

“Therefore the showers have been withheld” (ver. 3).

Some men smile at the fanatical notion that God so interferes in nature as to express moral disapprobation or moral regard: but who are they that smile? what have they done for the world? There is nothing so easy as to smile with a kind of benignant contempt—not the bitter scorn which great subjects might elicit from great scorers, but a sort of modified and semi-benignant contempt, as should say, The poor creatures! how little they know of the constitution of the universe, the laws of nature, the economy of time and space, and the general condition of things! All this reproach ought to have an effect upon us; but what effect? Because some man has smiled at our piety, is our piety therefore not worth entertaining, preserving, and extending? First, who is the man? What will he do for us in the great crisis? If he should turn out to be wrong, will he stand in our place and bear the issue bravely like a vicarious hero? What if his smile be turned against himself, and God should laugh at his calamity and mock when his fear cometh? Men who can smile at deep convictions are never to be trusted. A man who can smile at a pagan idolater, when that idolater is really and truly expressing his soul's uppermost temper in relation to the idol which he worships, is not a religious man; he, too, is a mocker: he may mock from a different level, but the same mockery is in him, and he does not understand human nature when religiously fired, elevated, inflamed, ennobled. There does not seem to be such a violation of reason in this declaration as might at first sight appear. If God is immanent in the universe, not a deity immeasurable distances away from his creation; if he is in it, part of it; if without him it could not hold together for a moment, there is nothing unreasonable in the thought that he should sometimes show resentment at the spirit of evil, indicate some emotion at least in the presence of ingratitude. We do the same ourselves. Parents sometimes give children to feel that the penalty of ill-behaviour is the withdrawal of a privilege, the abbreviation of a holiday, the suspension of a pleasure. Put it in what way we may, we still have under

all the external appearance the reality of our being so identified with the life of the house that we cannot allow evil behaviour, evil temper, ingratitude to pass without showing that it is undesirable, unwelcome, improper. Sometimes by deprivation God inflicts punishment upon those who turn away from him. In this case the penalty was one of deprivation—the showers had been withheld. Sometimes the penalty is positive, and there are too many showers. God drowns the world that denies him. He does not withhold the showers for want of water; the deluge is always ready: the river of God is full of water. It may be unscientific and ignorant to think that God interferes with nature, but it stands to our highest reason as a probable truth. If he made it, he may interfere with it; if he constructed it, he may sometimes wind it up, visit it, operate upon it, assert his eternal proprietorship. If the great landlord allows us to walk through his fields freely and joyously, he may sometimes, say, once in twenty-one years, put up a fence or a boundary, which being interpreted means, This path is mine, not yours; the boundary will be taken down again to-morrow, but it is here to-day to signify that you have acquired no rights by constant use. It is not an unnatural intervention, nor do we see that it is an unreasonable intervention, on the part of God, if we deny him, neglect him, scorn him, operate wholly against the spirit of his holiness, that he should now and again withhold the shower, or send such deluges upon the earth as shall wash away our seed and make a desert of our garden.

God penetrates the most skilfully contrived disguises:—

“Wilt thou not from this time cry unto me, My father, thou art the guide of my youth?” (ver. 4).

How many beautiful sermons have been preached upon this text when the text itself had no relation to the sermon! Still, the pathos was not wasted: it would have been mightier if it had not been falsely connected with a text which bears no reference to it. This is irony! God is playing the mocker now. He does that oftentimes: he allows men to go out on a fine morning, and sends them home drenched to the skin, with their pockets laden with disappointment, and their memory

stung all through and through with regrets. It is right ; it is educationally good. God looks upon these poor drenched creatures going home again. They thought they made the morning fine, they imagined the sun was a hired servant of theirs, and they had but to order him to shine on ; and now see them, half-bent, drenched, unwilling to talk to one another, impatient, fretful : what if this be God's doing on a small scale, as indicative of his still further and higher doing on nobler levels ? Wilt thou not call me Father ?—thou art equal to that ; thou art liar enough ; thou couldst even fold thy foul hands and lift up thine earth-filled eyes, and call me Father, and then go out and rob me. All this is made clear by verse 10 :—" And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah hath not turned unto me with her whole heart, but feignedly, saith the Lord." The word "feignedly" is literally, with a lie. See the picture : here is one figured as a penitent woman, who comes to pray—in other words, to tell lies in the sanctuary, and to heap up falsehoods upon the altar where the fire has gone out. But is this possible ? It is not only possible, it is actual, it is the history of to-day. Could we but see things as they really are, we should see that the largest figure amongst many competitive figures is that of Hypocrisy. That admits of many colours and many definitions and modifications. All hypocrisy is not the same as to external attitude and bulk and colour. How subtle it is ! It likes a little prayer ; it does not object to go where the music is good, and where the preaching is pointless ; it can speak smoothly, when it is full of anger ; it can promise musically, and disappoint mockingly and triumphantly ; it can sit like a saint, whilst its heart is far away or is plotting mischief. There is, then, a return to God which is no return ; there is a going to church which is not going to church ; there is a piety which is impious ; there is a calling to God as Father which God himself replies to ironically, as if men would call him anything to flatter him into the suspension of his judgment or the conferring of an immediate favour.

Yet God proclaims the great Gospel. Here we see the contending emotion :—

"Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, Return, thou backsliding Israel" (ver. 12).

No English can give the full force of the cry. This is verily

Hebrew of the Hebrew ; it can be but lamely given—"Turn back, thou that hast turned away ; turn back, thou renegade." It is a cry of the heart ; it is the pathos of Heaven. We feel it to be such sometimes. When we have gone many a mile away from the altar and have found ourselves enclosed in darkness and surrounded by danger, and when we have heard the voices of ravenous beasts in the lessening distance, we have been thankful for that most despicable of all things to the vain imagination, a gospel sermon. We have sat with broken hearts to hear some earnest man when he has assured us, as if he really believed it, that even we, prodigal of prodigals, might come home again ; we have said to the pleading preacher, Speak it to us once more, that we may be quite sure of the terms. Never did we say so in our intellectual haughtiness, when our resources were abundant, when our health was good, when our pleasures were unlimited ; then we asked for an intellectual treat : but when we felt life's reality, sin's torment ; when we came within scorching distance of perdition—do not dwell upon the word as if it were merely a literary term ; call it self-accusation—then we have exclaimed, Preach to us the gospel of return ; tell us if even we should find the door ajar if we ventured home again.

Men will never be brought back by force. God never arrests a man, and by some constabulary energy fixes him in heaven. That would be no heaven to such a man. We are not in heaven unless we are heavenly. God has no heaven for us if we are not godly. Men themselves must act. Here is a mystery of will and necessity, divine sovereignty and human volition ; and great battles may be fought around these theological terms to no effect. We must recognise the real philosophy of things, the actual sense of life, the innermost motive and pulse of being ; then we shall understand how it is that men cannot return, and yet they can return,—that they can only return by the attraction of a welcome, and that the attraction is itself an assistance to their upward home-going emotion. If we cannot explain it in words, we have felt it in the deepest places of the heart.

God reveals his character ; he says, "I am merciful, . . . and I will not keep anger for ever" (ver. 12). How could he ? Sweet

are these words! No man ever made them or put them together about any other god. Have you in all the history of mythology or idolatry found such a description of any hand-made deity? We might almost say it of the dear, beneficent sun: he does seem to be merciful; he who could burn us with light, kisses the tiny flower as if it were a little child; he who pours so much light upon the earth that it runs off, so to say, at the edges to water with glory under-worlds and other spaces, never hurts the earth with a dart of fire. But all this mercy is ascribed to the Living God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; and he will continue to reveal his mercy until he consummates the revelation in the Cross of Calvary, the death, the atonement, of his own Son.

God never varies the essential conditions of pardon—"Only acknowledge thine iniquity" (ver. 13). That is New Testament speech: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." But we must acknowledge, and we must acknowledge fully; we must keep back nothing. How difficult actually to empty the heart! We can confess a great deal, but we keep back the blackest word; we can confess all things in general terms, but to detail our sin, to write out a bill of particulars, to hand to God the diary of the heart, who could do it? Blessed be God, we have not to hand that diary to one another. If we have done wrong to any man, to that man we are bound to confess the wrong we have done; but we are not bound to tell priest or friend or dearest brother all we have done: we are to say to God, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight." We believe in confession, but not in confession to any fellow-sinner, who may even have exceeded ourselves in the enormity of iniquity. If you have done wrong to man, woman, or child, go and say so; without that there can be no forgiveness. Having done wrong to God, enter thou into thy closet, and when thou hast shut the door tell him all, and say that this very telling of it all means trust and love: thou couldst not whisper it in the ear of judgment,—thou venturdest to whisper it in the ear of mercy.



## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, our joy is in thy greatness, and not in our own resources. Thou wilt wonderfully beautify thy church in the days to come; we know not with what adornment thou shalt adorn thy bride. Behold, all things are at thy disposal, and thou wilt spare nothing that Zion may be glorified, and that the work of the Son of man may be completed in victory. Thou hast ever held out an alluring prospect to thy church; there has always been better wine to drink; there has always been some higher height to scale whence could be had a clearer and further view of things, lighted up with undreamed-of glory. In this prospect we serve; we say that what is now round about us cannot be the end of things; all that we see must be but a beginning, an opening gate, a dawning opportunity, a momentary glimpse, whatsoever signifies that which is significant; but the end who can tell? We rest in thy word; we are strengthened by thy promise; we are quieted by thy grace; we say, Let the Lord work as he will, and in the end he will justify his ways to men. Thou hast given us great words to live upon, yea, exceeding great and precious promises with which to nourish the soul. Lord, evermore give us this bread. Make the Cross our meeting-place, for there the angels are, there heaven begins because Christ died for the sons of men, and there is sealed the pardon of a believing world. For that Cross how can we thank thee? It meets all our necessities, it answers all the cry and pain of the afflicted soul; in that Cross is the balm of healing; elsewhere that balm cannot be found. May we live at the Cross, and live for the Cross; then the crown is assured, and all heaven shall welcome those who have loved the Son of God. Thy Holy Spirit thou wilt not withhold; he will work miracles in our life day by day, he will open our eyes that we may see, and our ears that we may hear, and every night shall hear the astounding tale of increase of light and multiplication of comfort. Let thy word be precious to us as water is to men who are in wildernesses; let thy promises lure us as bread draws men towards it who have known the gnawing of hunger; thus may we declare plainly that we hunger and thirst after righteousness, that the wells of the earth cannot satisfy our thirst, and that all the provisions of time are too small for the holy desire thou hast enkindled within us. Son of man, Son of God, God the Son, we throw our crowns at thy feet, for thou didst give them; we say, Not unto us, but unto thyself, be every ray of glory, world without end. King of kings, Lord of lords, only Potentate, reign over us, and put down all other rule. Amen.

## Chapter iv.

## THE PLEADINGS OF GOD.

"If thou wilt return, O Israel, saith the Lord, return unto me" (ver. 1).

THE people had just said they would return, for they were tired of their evil ways. They had been looking to the hills for salvation, and no salvation came; they had turned their eyes to the multitude of mountains, and found them to be utterly barren of hope. The Lord had told them this, and they had confirmed it by much experience of a painful kind. The people said: "We lie down in our shame, and our confusion covereth us: for we have sinned against the Lord our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even unto this day, and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God" (iii. 25). Men can say that as if they could not help doing the wickedness they complain of. This matter of confession needs analysis. We should look into it very penetratingly, for there may be irreligion in religion, impiety in piety. Why do men do the things that they are ashamed of, knowing that they will have to repent of them? And yet with all this staring them in the face with appalling vividness, they put out both hands to do evil, and they drink deeply at the streams of wickedness. They will repent to-morrow, and repeat the evil on the third day; they rest that they may get energy to serve the devil more faithfully; they retire to pray that they may come back with a keener appetite to the devil's banquet. This is the mystery of human nature; this is the insoluble point in the study of the soul. Yet the Lord allows himself (we speak reverently) to be mocked and deceived for a time. The moment he sees a tear he says, If you will return, I will dry that tear away. Whenever he hears a returning one crying out in the bitterness of his soul, he seems to say, The past is now forgotten; come in, and feast upon the true bread; come and be shielded by my omnipotence.

A strange ministry is that of Almightiness. It is almightiness—almost. Men who are critics only have found out that God cannot be almighty, or things would be different; and this they have held up as a revelation: whereas, it is no revelation, but

the veriest commonplace of the Bible. It is God who "repents" that he made man—in some sense we cannot understand; but there is no other word which could convey even a hint of his meaning to our obtuse minds. It is God who says, I cannot do it: I have failed. I have planted a vineyard and looked for grapes, and behold it has brought forth wild grapes; the vineyard has been ungrateful. I might have been the most unskilled husbandman, nay, I might have been a niggard in the vineyard, sparing everything that tended to nurture and develop; for here—holding up the wild grapes—is the result of all my toil and love and care. So we come upon a mysterious *if* in all the history of God's administration. "If thou wilt return"—why not make them return? Here man is stronger than God. We have seen in innumerable instances how true it is that God, who can handle universes, can do nothing with the heart he has made except with the heart's consent. He made man in his own image and likeness: it is dangerous to give your personality to another. What is there to be had without danger, without an infinite risk? It were better to be a man with the pain of manhood as a daily portion, than to be the proudest beast that shakes the earth with his great hoofs. It is better that the child should live to smite you in the face, than that it should be a child made of marble which has been carved, and which can neither speak nor pray nor sin nor laugh nor die. There is a grim comfort even in gravedigging under the hearthstone: when it is all over the afflicted one says: I had the child awhile, and during his sojourn with me he doubled my life and made every day a Sabbath; even now I would not give up the experience of the joy because of this rain of bitterest tears. It may be that God has some comfort in this old earth yet. We are not children that cannot lie. If we could not lie, we could not pray. It is because we can distress God that we can please him. Displeasure is a multiple; it is a complex term; it involves much; it is full of giving and taking and exchanging and transforming, so that heart passes into heart, life into life, and love doubles love, and prayer ennobles life into immortality. Behold God, then, as a pleader. "If thou wilt return, O Israel, saith the Lord, return unto me: and if thou wilt put away thine abominations out of my sight,"—if thou wilt swear, "The Lord liveth, in

truth, in judgment, and in righteousness,"—if thou wilt do these things, the issue will be glorious; it will also be beneficent, it will have an evangelistic effect upon the world. The reason seems to be curious, but it allows itself to be examined with the assurance that when it is really understood it will cast light upon many a mystery.

How does the reasoning culminate? Thus: If thou wilt return—if thou wilt put away the things of thy shame—if thou wilt wander no more—if thou wilt swear, "The Lord liveth, in truth, in judgment, and in righteousness," then "nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory." The meaning is, the heathen nations round about shall see thy return, and they will begin to own the power of God. That is the converting force that must be brought to bear upon the whole of the nations. The Church must be so beautiful as to attract attention. There must be something in prayer that there is in nothing else. Heathen nations may answer arguments: they cannot answer character. When Christians do right, pagans will believe; when Christians claim their uniqueness of quality and exemplify it, the men who get up arguments against Christianity will be ashamed of their own ingenuity, and run away from the things their hands have piled, saying, We cannot build fortresses against such quality of character. This is true missionary work. An honest England means a converted India. A drinking England means a sneering China. When we take our evil customs to other shores as well as our missionaries, what wonder if the natives should follow the customs and allow the missionaries to do what they please, and all their work to come to an impotent issue? We do the same thing: we copy the bad, we mimic the evil in all our mimetics, we reproduce defects, being skilled reproducers of feature and tone. It is the defect we reproduce, and not the sterling excellence. The Lord here lays down the sublime doctrine that if his Church would be right the world would soon be converted.

The chapter proceeds—"Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns." There is a negative work to be done. The ground wants cutting up, exposing to the light and the rain. "Sow not among thorns." Here is the hint of a great parable already. When Jesus Christ borrowed he borrowed from

himself. He was never indebted to any man for a thought. He quoted no parables, he made them for the occasion; and how exquisitely they fitted the opportunity! How upon all human life he laid the line of his imagination, and caused that imagination to take its mould from the immediate circumstances, and gathered from those circumstances his most solemn expositions and appeals. "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart" (ver. 4). Already the book begins to be spiritual. For a long time we have been with the symbols and types and hints of things, and we could not understand them; we said, Thank God we are not Jews! we never could go through all this dreary curriculum: surely the Lord was taunting the people and mocking them, and loading them with grievous burdens, in all this fire-lighting, and all this blood-shedding, and all this continual ritual, always ending where it began, and in its ending but creating a new beginning: we became weary of the infinite monotony. Here and there the book has revealed the true spiritual element. The commandments at the very first, as we have seen, put out tentacles that meant a kingdom invisible, for the commandments ended with "Thou shalt not covet." What a rise in the education of Israel! "Thou shalt not steal"—a vulgar exhortation: who wants to steal? But at the end, having got through the nine well, we come to "Thou shalt not covet." Already the kingdom of the spiritual is setting in; and now the prophet says, speaking in the name of God, "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart:" "rend your heart, and not your garments." This was the meaning of all the education. It was very irksome, most tedious, the people were groaning under it; but it was all required in order that the spiritual revelation might be made complete and vivid; the meaning was, It is the heart that must be circumcised; it is the spirit that must be cleansed; it is the soul that must be attuned to heaven's music. Be real, not ceremonial. Do not only be in the open church, into which every man may go, but find your reverent way into the inner sanctuary, and have an interview with God, face to face, when no one else is present. Do not have a set of dogmas, all trimmed and dressed, and marked in plain figures, to which you pay a moment's court once a week; but have living principles active

doctrines, penetrating beliefs, convictions that seize the whole nature, and conduct it through a purifying and ennobling process. The Lord will have no ritual that is not significant of an inward ministry. He will have no cleanliness of the body, unless it mean that the soul has undergone divine catharism, and is spiritually cleansed, as a vessel may be chemically purified. This is a sublime issue; this explains everything. It is so with our intellectual education. Who likes to learn alphabets? What do they all amount to, when the five- or six-and-twenty letters are all learned, in this shape and that, curious as if the genius of learning had determined to puzzle the intellect of the world? What are they? They say nothing; they do not know one another; they have to be introduced to one another, and combined, and related, and interrelated, and run into one another; they have to undergo a process of tessellation: but when the child first sees the living meaning of a sentence, and that sentence is full of light and poetry and music, he says, This is worth all the toil. To have been studying a foreign tongue, and then to be able to pass into the nation where it is spoken, and to hold intercourse with the inhabitants—easy, confident, ample intercourse—then the student says, It was worth all the long nights I spent upon the acquisition of this language: it has given me a new world, it has enlarged the horizon of my outlook, I am thankful for all the pains I underwent. So it is with Christian education. There are rituals, observances, penances, ceremonies, and they become irksome, until they yield up their meaning; and the moment a soul can out of its own self pray, shoot out one living sentence, it beholds new heavens and a new earth, and says, This is the meaning of all the discipline; blessed be God, I am a free man of the heavens; I can in my own name for my very self pray through Christ and receive blessings direct from God. If we have not circumcised our hearts, if we have not taken away the foreskins of our hearts and souls, we know nothing about the Christian religion and ought not to profess it.

In the twenty-second verse we have a remarkable charge:—

“For my people is foolish, they have not known me; they are sottish children, and they have none understanding.”

The peculiar charge is this: They are wise to do evil, but to



do good they have no knowledge. This is a mystery, and yet nothing is more palpable and provable. How easily we learn to go down to hell! What a toil it is in all life to climb, until we get into the meaning of it, and become real mountaineers; then we say, Let us go upward, for we feed upon the very wind, we grow strong by the very exercise; we pant to stand upon the highest pinnacles of nature. But how easy it is not to obey! how easy not to go to church! How delightfully easy to throw off the yoke and to terminate the discipline of life! Employers of labour know this; labourers themselves are well acquainted with it; all schoolmasters and trainers of the young would assent to the proposition instantly and without reserve, and every living man would say, That is true. If that is true, the whole point is yielded. Why should it be true? The direct contrary ought to be the case: it ought to be hard to be crooked and rough and foolish and vain and worldly. It ought to be almost impossible for a man made in the image and likeness of God to drink himself to death, to rob his neighbour, to play the fool, to sleep with the devil. Given creation at the beginning, and it never could occur to the finite intellect as a possibility that man should think one ignoble thought, utter one untrue word, commit himself to one dishonourable policy; the exclamation would be, It is impossible! But we have done it! We have broken all the ten commandments one by one; we have shattered them in their totality; we have run away from God. We have done miracles which have astounded the heavens.

Here is inverted genius; here is abused faculty. Here is a man who is in the high pay of the devil. For the devil could hardly do without him, so inventive is he in all evil; he has coined a new language, minted a new currency of evil; he has achieved the right to share the throne of blackness with Beelzebub. The Lord has determined that all falsehood shall come to an unholy end.

"And when thou art spoiled, what wilt thou do? Though thou clothest thyself with crimson, though thou deckest thee with ornaments of gold, though thou rentest thy face with painting, in vain shalt thou make thyself fair; thy lovers will despise thee, they will seek thy life" (ver. 30).

This renting of the face is, literally, enlarging of the eyes,

through kohl or antimony—a trick of artificial beauty. And the poor creature has taken out her best clothes, painted herself with the fairest colours, done all she could from the outside, and behold the issue is: “Thy lovers will despise thee”—they will see through thee. The knave shall know that he is more seen through than he supposes. He is very skilful up to a given point. The accusation relates both to men and women; charges can easily be made; but it is the whole human nature that is involved in this impeachment. There is clothing, and there is painting, and there is decoration with gold, and there is renting of the face; but after all is over men feel that this is unreal, untrue, utterly rotten at the core; they say this is “a goodly apple rotten at the heart.” Let us understand this, that whether we be discovered now or then, we shall be discovered. The hollow man shall be sounded, and shall be pronounced void. Thou art weighed in the balances, and found wanting; and thou, poor fool, hast covered up the hectic flush of consumption with indigo that will wash off, or with some other colour that can be cleansed away; thou hast made thyself look otherwise than as thou art: but all that is external shall be taken from thee, and thou shalt be seen in thy naked hideousness and ghastliness. This is right! The revelation will be awful; but it ought to be made, or heaven itself will be insecure. Oh what disclosures then! The canting hypocrite without his cloak; the skilful mocker who has lost his power of jesting; the knave who always said a grace he had committed to memory before he cut the bread he had stolen; the preacher who knew the right, and yet the wrong pursued; the fair speaker, who knew the very subtlety of music as to persuasion, and yet decoyed souls down the way at the end of which is hell. Then the other revelation will also be made. There may be men of rough manners who shall prove to have been all the while animated by a gentle spirit; there may be those who have been regarded as Philistines who are God’s gentlemen; there may be those who have been thought as unworthy of courtesy who shall be set high among the angels. “Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.” To be seen through,—that is an awful thought. To have it made plain that the smile was

only on the lips and not in the soul,—who could bear the disclosure? To have the royal purple taken away and the lurch of the cripple revealed,—who could bear it? Who can stand before the judgment of God? When the day burneth like an oven, who can bear the ardour? Unless we face these solemn and fundamental questions we never can understand what is meant by God's great offer, by Christ's redeeming Cross, by the ministry of the Holy Ghost. If we tell lies to ourselves, we disqualify ourselves for hearing the music of the gospel. If we live a frivolous surface-life, eating, drinking, talking, sleeping, buying, selling, getting gain, moving to and fro like a weaver's shuttle, then we shall know nothing about the agony of Golgotha, and the meaning of the shed blood of the Son of God: it will be mockery to us; the Sabbath will be a burden, the church will be a nuisance, the grand appeal will be wasted eloquence. But let a man come to feel that he is really a soul, in very deed, made in the image and likeness of God; let him feel one sting of conscience; let him know that he can do nothing towards obliterating the past, even if he could live a beautiful life from this day forth evermore; then he will begin to ask, Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Has no provision been made in this great medical universe for the healing of wounds such as gape in my soul? Does the world grow herbs for the healing of the body, and is there no garden where things are grown for the healing of the soul? It is in that hour that the Christian evangelist has his glorious opportunity; it is then he can say, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved; the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost; thy shame is thy introduction to the Father; thy penitence shall open the door of the sanctuary in which he dwells; he needs no introduction to a broken heart, a contrite spirit, a soul that afflicts itself because of its self-helplessness. Thus from the Old Testament, as from the New, there comes up a gospel—in the one case, the necessity for deliverance; in the other, the living Deliverer—the tender, sympathetic, all-understanding, mighty, infinite Son of God.

PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, withhold not thy showers from us, even though we sin against thee; still plead with us by the goodness of thy providence. We know thou canst afflict us and crush us and fret us beyond endurance. Spare the rod! But why do we plead with thee when thou hast said, I am merciful? Thy mercy endureth for ever. We cry out, because the rod makes us smart under its stroke, and not always because we know the criminality of this sin; we are selfish, we mourn consequences when we ought to lament the causes. Enable us to see this, and to act accordingly, that so we may seal it on our own hearts, and hold over the secret places of our life the candle of God. The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. The heart will tell lies to heaven. We have a cloak called hypocrisy, which we wear, and which covers us well; sometimes the wind blows it aside, or some rough hand shakes it, and somewhat of our moral ghastliness is revealed. We dare not always look at ourselves, for we are often cowards. Search us, and try us, and see if there be in us any wicked way, and lead us in the way everlasting. We are ashamed of ourselves; we have great ability in falsehood, we smile with the face and frown with the heart; we promise much, and do nothing; we say we will pray unto the Lord, and we forget our heart's desire. Yet thou dost not cut us down; truly, when thou dost say, I am merciful, we can answer, This is even so: his mercy endureth for ever. While we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Herein is love! This is the mystery of grace, the mystery of godliness,—how great it is in love, and light, and hope! We come to the Lord Jesus Christ, the wounded man; our faith lays its trembling hand upon him, our self-accusing, misgiving heart says, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief. Lord, hear us, and let thine answer surprise even us, who are accustomed to the miracles of thy goodness. Amen.

## Chapter v. 21-24.

“Hear now this, O foolish people, and without understanding; which have eyes, and see not; which have ears, and hear not: fear ye not me? saith the Lord: will ye not tremble at my presence, which have placed the sand for the bound of the sea by a perpetual decree, that it cannot pass it: and though the waves thereof toss themselves, yet can they not prevail; though they roar, yet can they not pass over it? But this people hath a revolting and a rebellious heart; they are revolted and gone. Neither say they in their heart, Let us now fear the Lord our God, that giveth rain, both the former and the latter, in his season: he reserveth unto us the appointed weeks of the harvest.’

## GOD'S JUDGMENT OF SELF-WILL.

THE tone in which God expostulates with Israel, and the figures by which he represents the kind of punishment which he will bring upon them, are really startling. The house of Jacob and all the families of Israel are charged with having forgotten God; priest and lawyer, pastor and prophet, had turned from the true testimony; they had become unto God as the degenerate plant of a strange vine; they had said to a rock, Thou art my father, and to a stone, Thou hast brought me forth. The threatened retribution was very terrible: they were made to feel that it was an evil and a bitter thing to sin against the Lord their God; they were to encounter the lion from the thicket, and the destroyer of the Gentiles; the enemy was to come up as clouds, and his chariots as a whirlwind, with horses swifter than eagles, a wolf of the evening was to spoil them, and a leopard was to watch over their cities; God's word was to be as fire, and the people were to be as wool before it. This is how the case stands as presented by the prophet Jeremiah. The text is part of a message which was to be declared in the house of Jacob and published in Israel. It shows that three results were produced by self-assertion against the rule of God; will the same cause produce the same effect? Has any change occurred in the nature of God, or in the constitution of man, to warrant a rupture of the original relations subsisting between God and men? Let us see the results of self-will as shown in the text, and compare them with the testimony of our own consciousness and experience.

(1) Self-will in relation to the divine government destroys the natural capacities and faculties of man.—“Foolish people, without understanding; which have eyes, and see not; which have ears, and hear not.” How different this description to the original portraiture of man! Foolish, blind, deaf—such is man when he has turned his back upon God, and taken life into his own hands. The fine gold becomes dim, the great power is laid in the dust. It would seem as if all the faculties of our nature were dependent for continuance upon their religious use; moral paralysis is equivalent to intellectual stagnation; not to pray is

to die. Is it not much the same as if a flower should be shut out from the light and dew? The soul is, so to speak, withdrawn from the source of its being—cut off from the fountain of life, and allowed to exhaust its little resources, to languish in loneliness, and to die of hunger. The gifts of God are daily; our bread is a morning mercy; our sleep is an evening benediction. If, then, we leave God, how soon does our poverty come as an armed man, and our want as one that travaileth! We shall most clearly see how the natural faculties of man are impaired, and indeed destroyed, by irreligion, by considering that the same truth holds good in the ordinary business of life,—separation from God means folly, blindness, and general incapacity, even in earthly things. Take the case of our daily bread, and see how the doctrine is sustained. Certain means are divinely appointed to secure given results: the earth is to be cultivated; the seed is to be sown; the influences of the atmosphere are to be unobstructed. This is the religious, the divinely appointed method of obtaining the common bread of life. Mark that—it is God's method, and therefore, without straining language, may be termed the religious method. Whatever is right is religious, whatever is rightly religious is of God. What is agriculture but a branch of natural theology? Bread is to the body what truth is to the soul, and God's method is as essential in the one case as in the other. But suppose that self-will should prevail in the natural as it does in the moral sphere, what would be the result? Let any man set aside God's plan of obtaining daily bread, and call upon his own genius to supply it; let the earth remain uncultivated; let the seed remain unsown: can it be doubted that the insane man would soon be taught by famine what he would not learn from reason or infer from revelation? Self-will in that particular department would soon work its own cure, because man feels more the importance of the body than the soul: he has inverted original relations and become a practical materialist. For the lower life, the life dependent upon the products of the earth, man must be religious; even the atheist in name becomes a deist in practice when he puts the plough into the ground. He will not confess it; to his own consciousness even he will not own that ploughing is a religious act; but in point of fact it is: the process of growing corn is a permanent protest against the self-will and self-idolatry of



man, and a continual assertion of the benign and omnipotent sovereignty of God.

There is no violence in transferring the argument from the body to the soul : on the contrary, such transference would seem to be a logical necessity ; for if God is essential to the inferior, is he not essential to the superior ? If man cannot do the less, how can he do the greater ? If by taking thought he cannot add one cubit to his stature, how can he, apart from God, nourish and strengthen his soul, and so train himself to the perfectness of moral manhood ? The inquiry founded upon natural experience and justified by the common instincts of men, necessitates, if man would be faithful to himself, further inquiry as to spiritual theology, and challenges contradiction of the statement, that a people of " a revolting and a rebellious heart " soon prove themselves to be foolish, blind, and deaf. A man who would not eat bread because he could not make his own will dominant through every detail of the process of germination would be pitied or despised ; yet men who cannot by their own will or power make one grain of corn for the support of the body are often found resenting God's offers of enlightenment and guidance of the soul ! What wonder that God should call upon the heavens to be astonished and the earth to be horribly afraid ! And what wonder, repelled and dishonoured as he is, that he should say : " Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord : and they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it." Think of God sending a famine upon the soul,—of minds pining and dying because divine messages have been withdrawn ! We know what the effect would be if God were to withhold the dew, or to trouble the air with a plague, or to avert the beams of the sun : the garden would be a desert, the fruitful field a sandy plain, the wind a bearer of death, summer a stormy night, and life itself a cruel variation of death,—so penetrating, so boundless is the influence of God in nature. Is it conceivable that the withdrawment of God's influence would be less disastrous upon the spirit of man ? The question is pressed upon the attention of those who, while cheer-

fully acknowledging God's presence and work in nature, are less willing to recognise the entire dependence of the soul upon the Holy Ghost.

The point which is before us is, that self-will, usurping divine functions, impairs and destroys the natural faculties of man, makes him foolish, blind, deaf. He may be shrewd in worldly affairs, sagacious in ordinary speculation, but so far as the great universe is concerned he is deaf, blind, foolish; he who might have soared in a light above the brightness of the sun, grovels like an insect upon the earth. A right idea of God is held to be a powerful instrument in the development of the human intellect. Naturally and obviously so: it is the primal idea, it is the very germ of life; in the most inclusive sense we live and move and have our being in God. Out of God there is no true being; the spasm, the convulsion, which is mistaken for existence is an impious sarcasm upon life. There is everything in deep and intelligent religious conviction to evoke the latent energies of the spiritual nature; it carries the spirit from particulars to universals, from detailed accidents to fundamental principles, it transfigures all outward nature into a splendid symbol of God, it overpasses the narrow limits of time and draws lessons from eternity, it pours a gladdening light upon the darkness of the grave, it promises magnificent possibilities of service in the endless day of the better world. Such conviction never calls any man downward, never gives him a degrading view of human nature, never vexes the soul with reproaches about its littleness, but ever teaches that so long as the soul grows according to God's law, it moves towards "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

(2) Another point, related though varied, is, self-will in relation to the divine government plunges the soul into irreverence:—

"Fear ye not me? saith the Lord: will ye not tremble at my presence, which have placed the sand for the bound of the sea by a perpetual decree, that it cannot pass it: and though the waves thereof toss themselves, yet can they not prevail; though they roar, yet can they not pass over it? (ver. 22).

The "fear" spoken of may be taken as expressive of homage,

veneration, and, in fact, everything that enters into a complete idea of worship. The destruction of veneration may be regarded as the final triumph of self-will. Man comes to regard himself as his own god, to measure everything by its bearing on his own immediate interests, and thus to lose the advantage which even a higher conception of mere material greatness would confer. There is a very simple philosophy of spiritual retrogression. It turns upon man's self-magnifying power, and his consequent ambition for self-government. He says: "If there be a God, he is at all events unseen; I am the highest power that comes within the cognisance of my own senses; other beings, such as demons and angels, have been spoken of; but they are fictions of genius, dreams of ill-regulated minds; I am king, I am god.' This is the natural creed of Sight, and it has many virtual subscribers. Now, it is to the senses themselves that God addresses the appeal of the text. He would appoint the ocean as umpire in the great controversy. Look, he says in effect, at the sea; it is bounded by the sand; its great fury cannot prevail against the limit which I have appointed: can you enlarge the decree which determines the movement of the deep? Can you beat back the waves, or silence the roar of the billows? Can you divert the paths of the sea, or find a foothold on the highway of the waters? You know you cannot. Stand by the seashore, then, and learn that there is a will higher than your own, a power which could crush your puny arm; listen, and let your soul hear a voice mightier than man's; incline your ear, and let the spirit hear the going of God upon the quiet or troubled waves; reflect, wonder, bow down and worship. Will ye not tremble at my presence, which have placed the sand for the bound of the sea by a perpetual decree that it cannot pass it? The self-willed man, sullen through conscious weakness, is excluded from the government of the sea. So much is gained. A beginning at least is made for argument against self-apotheosis.

Turn from the sea to the sun. God's remonstrance is continued against the creed of Sight. "Hast thou commanded the morning since thy days; and caused the dayspring to know his place? . . . Where is the way where light dwelleth? and as for darkness, where is the place thereof? . . . By what way is the light parted,

which scattereth the east wind upon the earth? . . . Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion? Canst thou bring forth Mazzaroth in his season? or canst thou guide Arcturus with his sons?" Here we come again to realise the impotence of self-will. We cannot control the morning; no star hears our voice; the light is not a suitor in our court. What then? We are to draw spiritual lessons from these natural facts, and to say with the Psalmist, "The day is thine, the night also is thine: thou hast prepared the light and the sun." It is surely a most suggestive consideration that there are in nature limits to man's will, boundaries which enclose his power. As a mere matter of fact, he cannot escape them: he may turn sullen, he may fret and vex his soul, yet nature remains as a perpetual testimony of God's wisdom and power. The sea lifts up its voice for God, the sun is bright with his glory, the moon and the stars are fixed by his ordinance. From all this, is it possible to resist the conclusion that man, who is limited in nature, cannot have all power in thought? But the mournful fact is recognised that, though man is limited in his relations to nature, he can look at her wonders without any religious concern; he can traverse the sea without fearing God; he can make a mere convenience of the sun, and pass through the seasons without prayer or praise. This is the natural working of self-will. It turns the heart in upon itself. It is blind to beauty, it is deaf to music. It says, If I cannot be sovereign, I will not be dependent. It is quite clear that self-will and veneration are incompatible; it is as clear that sin is the outward expression of self-will, and that nothing will restore the soul to its proper relations to God but that which attacks and destroys the sinful spirit. So long as man is morally wrong, he cannot understand the deepest teachings of the outward world; he will not worship as he walks by the sea, he will not sing to God, however bright the light of morning. An appeal to human experience would verify the doctrine of revelation, for all men must have felt how self-esteem has lowered veneration, and how self-satisfaction has undervalued or ignored the works of God. The self-idolatrous man has eyes that see not, ears that hear not, a heart that does not understand; by his very ambition he has laid himself in the dust; his building with one hand has been thrown down by the other; thinking himself

to be God, he has been placed among the beasts of the field ; he has been poisoned by the incense of his own vanity. This is the way in which retributive law works. If a man will obstinately and defiantly persist in committing trespass, he must be the victim of his own presumption, for sentence of death is pronounced against him who, unbidden, attempts to ascend the mount of God.

A mind destitute of veneration is deprived of holy stimulus. Nature is darkened, revelation is sealed, history is withdrawn. The soul sits amidst its own ruins, and in its insanity mistakes the part for the whole. The fire of religion is extinguished, and in its ashes the noblest capabilities of manhood are buried. Self-will having destroyed the natural faculties of man and plunged the soul into irreverence, it is not to be wondered at that—

(3) Self-will dissociates the gifts of nature from the Giver.

“Neither say they in their heart, Let us now fear the Lord our God, that giveth rain, both the former and the latter, in his season : he reserveth unto us the appointed weeks of the harvest” (ver. 24).

When God is deposed from his spiritual sovereignty of the individual life, his practical exclusion from material nature is a necessary consequence. Revolted man will accept the rain because he cannot live without it, but the Giver will not be so much as named ; the corn will be gathered, but those who bear the sheaves will have no harvest-hymn for God. How rapid, tumultuous, fatal, is the course of moral revolt ! The purpose of God was evidently to have his name identified with the common mercies of life, that our very bread and water might remind us constantly of his gentle and liberal care. He was not to be confined to purely spiritual contemplation, to be the subject of the soul's dream when lost in high reverie, or to be thought of as a Being far off, enclosed within the circle of the planets, or throned in the unapproachable palaces of an undiscovered universe : he desires to be seen spreading our table in the wilderness, causing the earth to bring forth and bud for our benefit, turning our weary feet towards the water-springs, and nourishing us in the time of weakness ; verily, “he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.” “Are there



any among the vanities of the Gentiles that can cause rain ? or can the heavens give showers ? art not thou he, O Lord our God ? therefore we will wait upon thee : for thou hast made all these things." Men may eat unblessed bread, and be bodily the stronger for it, but it is a sore and lasting reproach to the soul. The course of moral revolt ends in this, ends in the deposition of God and in the worship of self. Man ploughs, sows, reaps, and considers all the influences which co-operate in the production of results as mere features of inanimate nature, existing and working apart altogether from intelligent or moral will. The universe becomes a stupendous machine ; they who get good crops have used the machine skilfully, and they whose fields are fruitless have misunderstood or misapplied the machine. The universe was designed to be the temple, the very covering, of God ; but the worship of self has wrought a bad transfiguration upon it, and now the thief, the unclean beast, and the lying prophet prevail on every hand.

The demoralisation of man may have a mischievous effect upon nature itself. We sometimes speak of a bad harvest : what if behind it there has been a bad life ? When the soul has deadened itself in relation to God, when it has become foolish, blind, and deaf, God's only opportunity of asserting his sovereignty may be through a physical medium. Where doctrine fails plague may succeed. Where the Holy Ghost has been grieved and quenched, the blight may fall upon the wheatfield and the vineyard ; where love has been mocked, the sword may prevail. Again and again physical retribution has followed moral disorder. "For thus the Lord said, The whole land shall be desolate ; yet will I not make a full end. For this shall the earth mourn, and the heavens above be black ;" "your iniquities have turned away these things, and your sins have withholden good things from you ;" "be thou instructed, O Jerusalem, lest my soul depart from thee ; lest I make thee desolate, a land not inhabited." Here, then, is one phase of the law of retribution—physical chastisement of moral evil. The same law operates in the common walks of life. The parent, the employer, the magistrate, all adopt it ; the body is made to suffer for the soul ; and, in the divine government, a harvest thanklessly received may be exchanged for unfruitfulness



and death. Why should men complain, when they do precisely the same thing in their own sphere? When the child sins, physical punishment is awarded; when the citizen breaks the law, bodily imprisonment or material loss is the consequence,—why, then, should impious and unreasoning wonder be excited when for the sins of men God shuts up the rain, or sends a plague upon the days of harvest? When the heart is right towards God, God will not withhold his blessing from the earth: “Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee: then shall the earth yield her increase.” Physical blessing will follow spiritual worship; no good thing will be withheld from them that walk uprightly. “If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them; then will I give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield her increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.”

In the light of these statements we have a double view of the unity of the moral and material systems of government. One view is from the human side: when man sins, commits a trespass in the spiritual region, he finds the result of his sin in the physical department, the reflection of his spiritual misrule is seen in dried fountains and fruitless fields, in devastating storms and fatal plagues; the universe takes up arms in defence of law. Another view is from the divine side. God shows favour upon the earth for reasons derived from the spiritual character of the people, and demonstrates the superiority of the soul over the body by making its condition the measure of his material benefactions. How terrific, how hopeless, then, is the condition of the sinner! He finds God in all places; the system of government is one; the Judge is everywhere, filling heaven and making earth his footstool, walking upon the wings of the wind, clothing himself with light as with a garment! Poor and short must be the dominion of self-will—if it cannot be broken by the gentle persuasion of God's love, it will be subdued by the withdrawal of temporal mercies; for there can be but one God, and his dominion must be absolute and permanent.

## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, we are afraid of thy power : by terrible things in righteousness dost thou work amongst the nations of the earth : our God is a consuming fire. Yet are we not afraid of thy mercy ; we come to it as to a sure refuge ; because thy compassions fail not, therefore are we not consumed. God be merciful unto us sinners ! Thou didst not send thy Son to destroy men's lives, but to save them ; thou hast no pleasure in the death of the wicked ; thou dost cry unto those who leave thee, saying, Turn ye, turn ye ! why will ye die ? Thy Son, when he came near the city, wept over it, and said he would have gathered it together as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings ; but the rude city would not, and stoned the prophets, and killed the Saviour. Yet dost thou spare us marvellously : thy forbearance is to us a daily astonishment. Thou dost not bring down thy power upon us or we should die, but with all patience and gentleness thou dost continue thy ministry amongst us, if haply some poor soul may turn again and begin to pray. But thy spirit will not always strive with men : is there not an appointed hour when mercy shall cease to be ? is it not fixed in thy decrees that thy Gospel shall be withdrawn, and no longer with music of heaven beseech and importune the souls of men ? We bless thee that the Cross is still standing amongst us, that the Saviour's name is still proclaimed with the unction of gratitude, and with the energy of conviction. We bless God that we are upon praying-ground. We would, in the Name that opens heaven, come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. Spare us yet a little longer ! Spare the tree another year ! Thou delightest to spare ; thou hast no joy in anger : thou art the Creator ; thou wouldst not be the destroyer. May we look to thy love as our refuge ! In thy compassion and thy tender pity oh spare us, that we may even yet utter our prayers and tell thee how broken-hearted we are, that we have not kept thy statutes or walked in the way of thy commandments. Show us thy love in Christ ; reveal the mystery of the Cross, and may we answer it with the tears of our hearts, and with the obedience of our lives. Amen.

## Chapter vii. 10.

"We are delivered to do all these abominations."

## ORGANISATION AND RESPONSIBILITY.

THAT men are variously constituted is a fact not merely profoundly interesting to the speculative philosopher, but of the greatest practical consequence to the Christian philanthropist.

While the genus, man, is founded on a common basis, the individual is marked by characteristics singular to himself. We are rooted in the same soil, yet each seems to develop according to a law of his own. We have much in common, yet are individualised by the strongest contrasts. All men bear the same image, yet no two men are alike; the superscription upon all is the writing of God, yet the pronunciation of all that superscription is as varied as the dialects of Babel. We are one, yet many; we are many, yet one; distinct as the waves, yet one as the sea; lonely as the stars, yet united as the firmament; diversified as the mountains, yet one as the globe. In all this contrast and antithesis, all this many-coloured and many-toned variousness of humanity, we have distinctness and vitality of personal character. In this view of humanity we obtain an indistinct and incomplete, yet instructive hint of what is comprehended in the Infinite Life of God. While all men have a common life, each man appears to have a portion of life peculiarly and specially his own; and so, going through all the uncounted generations of humanity, and taking note not only of the common centre, but of all the individual radii, we feel how full, how vast, how infinite, must be the vitality of God!

Let us look at some special instances of peculiar organisation, and then consider them in relation to personal responsibility. For example, take the man whose dominating characteristic is Acquisitiveness. That man's creed is a word, and that word is but a syllable: his creed is *Get*; nothing less, nothing more,—simply *Get*! His very hand is a crook that may be used for plucking fruit off the highest trees, or plunging into the deepest streams. He is ever seeing his way clear to more and more property. He would turn heaven itself into a market-place, and drive sharp bargains with the angels. While other men are inhaling the poetry which breathes around the mountain range, he sees how it could be drained and utilised up to the very top,—that solemn top which has heard no eloquence but the thunder, and known no plough but the lightning. He calls the gift of womanly devotion—“waste”; and being quick at mental arithmetic he soon finds that the ointment given by the hand of uncalculating and ungrudging love “might have been sold,”—

think of that, "might have been sold, and given to the poor:" see how this man of dust puts the possibility,—he says it might have been "sold" and "given," as if it could not have been "given" without first being "sold": with him benevolence is a matter of weights and scales; with him the true way to heaven is over the counter; with him buying and selling and getting gain are the highest triumphs of mortal genius. Ask him why. Instantly he recurs to his organisation. He says: "God made me as I am; he did not consult me as to the constitution of my being; he made me acquisitive, and I must be faithful to my organisation; and I will go forward to meet him at the day of judgment, and tell him to his face that he has me as he made me, and I disclaim all responsibility."

The organisation of another man predominates in the direction of Combateness. The man is litigious, quarrelsome, cantankerous, violent. He is "such a son of Belial, that a man cannot speak to him." His breast is a volcano. He alienates his friends; he thrice slays his foes. He is so sensitive as to be wounded by a passing shadow. He imagines that creation is continually pronouncing judgment upon him. In a moment the burning word of defiance is on his lips, and his wrath is expressed without restraint. Ask him why. He says: "I must be faithful to my constitution; my whole manhood is intensely combative; I did not make myself; God has me as he made me, and I disown all laws of obligation."

Here is a woman whose countenance expresses the most urgent curiosity; her face is a mark of interrogation; she is always prying into forbidden matters, and the moment any subject assumes mystery or secrecy her whole nature is stirred into the most anxious agitation. She puts forth her hand eagerly to the forbidden tree: if it had not been forbidden, she would not have troubled it; but the interdict enkindled every passion, and she cannot rest until her inquisitiveness is satisfied. The word "Why?" is continually on her tongue. She would cross-examine the angels, and open the sealed books of God. She feels the burning of a perpetual thirst; a thirst which cannot be slaked at vulgar streams, but must be quenched at the fountain which springs from the distant hills. Ask the reason; she answers:

'I must be myself; God gave me my organisation; he determined the temperature of my blood; I shall cultivate his gifts, and if any injury arise the blame shall be charged upon himself.

Here is a man with little Hope. He sees a lion on every way; he dreads that ruin will be the end of every enterprise; he knows not the sweetness of contentment or the repose of an intelligent hope; he is always mourning, always repining; his voice is an unceasing threnody, his face a perpetual winter. He sees no angel-forms in the glad, laughing spring; summer itself is chilled into winter by his icy breath; he reads no writing of God in the rainbow; there is no dimple of joy in the soft young cheek of May; and all June's wealth of light shows him nothing but corresponding shadows. His life is a mournful plaint. No lyric charms him from his sadness; no minstrelsy tempts his sullen heart into rhythmic throbs. Ask him why. He says: "God so made me; if he had put within me the angel of Hope, I should have been sharer of your gladness; I should have been your companion in the choir; I should have been a happier man: he covered me with night that owns no star; he gave my fingers no cunning art of music; he meant me to look at him through tears and to offer my poor worship in sighs."

These instances may suffice to show, from one point of view, the relation of organisation to responsibility. The argument in brief is, that men must be faithful to their constitution; that if God meant men to be poets, they would be poets; if soldiers, soldiers; if accumulators, accumulators; and so forth, the question being simply one of organisation,—organisation for which the men themselves are not responsible.

We cannot enter into all the questions which may lie between God and man on the subject of organisation. Let us take one or two such cases as have just been outlined. We found the acquisitive man getting gold, getting at all risks; getting till his conscience was seared and his understanding darkened. In that case ought we to sympathise with the man, saying, "We are sorry for you; we lament that your organisation compels you to be avaricious: we know you cannot help it, so we exempt you from all responsibility"? No! we would say as in thunder;

No ! we do not find fault with the organisation of the acquisitive man ; but if he pleads the excuse already cited, we openly charge him with having degraded, prostituted, and diabolised that constitution ; he has not used it, but abused it ; he has not been faithful, but faithless, and must be branded as a criminal. The man's organisation is acquisitive ; be it so : that circumstance in itself does not necessitate crime. There are two courses open to the acquisitive man. He can rake in the mud and burrow in the drains of the city ; he can covet the one ewe lamb or the poor man's acre of vineyard ; he can grind the face of honest poverty, and oppress him who has no helper ; he may leave no "handfuls of purpose" for the needy gleaner ; he may "go over" the olive boughs until not one particle of fruit remains for "the stranger, the fatherless, or the widow : " all that he may do ; the course is open—the choice is his own ! But is that all ? Truly, blessedly, No ! He may carry the full force of his acquisitions in another direction ; he may listen to the invitations of wisdom ; he may enrich himself with heavenly spoil. To him we say, Do be faithful to your organisation, do get, get money by right means, get exaltation by legitimate processes ; but with all thy getting, get understanding, "for the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold ; she is more precious than rubies, and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her."

Here there are two courses : the one goes downward into dust, into mire, into hell ; the other goes upward, into wisdom, into light, into heaven. We are not responsible for our organisation, but for the use we make of it ; we are not responsible for the faculty of speech, but we are responsible for the manner in which we employ it ; we can use it in unholy communications, such as "defile the man," or we can "open our mouth for the dumb," and "plead the cause of the poor and needy."

The combative man ; what of him ? We found him fighting, storming, raging. His life was hot with passion, and his eye glared with a murderous intent. Do we sympathise with him ? "Sir, your case demands commiseration, inasmuch as you must be faithful to your organisation, and that organisation happens to



be a dreadful one?" No! to the combative man we say: There are two courses open to you: you can fight with muscle, and steel, and gunpowder; you may train yourself to be pitiless as a tiger; you may be petulant, resentful, hard-hearted: the choice is before you to pronounce the elective word! Or, there is another course open: you may choose weapons that are not carnal; you may resist the devil; you may "wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." You need not throw off the panoply of war and assume the attire of peace. Put on the whole armour of God. Helmet, breastplate, sword, shield, girdle, sandals,—put it on! and shout the war-cry through the devil's camp. There is scope enough for combativeness—your organisation need not be dormant. Which course do you adopt? You are not responsible for your organisation, but you are responsible for the use you make of it; you can make yourself a plague and a terror, or you may become a valiant champion, whose foot shall be upon the neck of the enemies of God!

Take the case of inordinate inquisitiveness. There are two courses open to the inquisitive person; to him we say: You can meanly pry into concerns which are not your own; you can be found under the eaves overhearing the sacred words of confidence; you can be hunting for forbidden prey within the hallowed enclosure of social trust;—in that ignoble way you may display the chief characteristic of your mental nature, prowling about in the darkness, robbing your friends of their innermost treasures. There is another course open; God has set before every man an ample domain, in which he may exercise inquiry: you may watch the worlds and inquire into the mysteries of their relations, how they warm themselves and others by revolution, and brighten themselves by continual activity; ask them questions, plead for answers; sit down by the side of summer, and inquire diligently of her wondrous cunning and inexhaustible fertility; ask how she weaves the garland, or moulds the blossom, or covers the nakedness of the forest; acquaint yourself with all the minstrels which fill the air with truest music; interrogate the sea, ask the secret of its eternal sob, and inquire concerning

its palace-caves, fashioned without craft or cunning of man : or exercise your inquisitiveness in other directions ; go from nature to humanity ; inquire after your brother's well-being ; seek out the lurking places of guilt, and go in search of the balm which can heal the soreness of the heart ; and when men ask you how you employ your inquisitive faculty, you can answer : " I inquired for wisdom, and sought out the dwelling-place of understanding ; I was eyes to the blind, and feet was I to the lame ; I was a father to the poor ; and the cause which I knew not, I searched out."

The argument which the fatalist bases upon organisation is self-annihilating when applied to the common relations of life. The fatalist himself does not believe in his own doctrine ; in speculative reasoning he is eager to charge moral crime upon organic defect ; yet, in practical magistracy, he arraigns and condemns the criminal to punishment. But how monstrous an outrage is this upon his own creed ! The criminal was compelled through stress of organisation to commit the crime, yet the fatalist punishes him for doing what he could not help ! Let the principle of the fatalist be admitted, and there is an end to all legislation—an end, indeed, to the social compact itself. All associated life is regulated by a system of restraints ; but restraint implies self-control, and self-control is directly opposed to fatalism. Let a criminal plead that he could not help committing a certain crime ; and if the judge allow the plea, he will at once treat the criminal as a lunatic, and instruct the officers of justice accordingly. Magistracy proceeds upon the principle that men can " help " committing crime. All human legislation assumes man's power of self-regulation, and grounds itself on the grand doctrine of man's responsibility to man. At this point, then, divine revelation meets human reason, and insists upon the same principle in relation to God. Theology says, You hold yourselves responsible to one another on all social matters ; you punish the criminal ; you ignore the plea of fatalism on all questions of property, order, and security ; now go farther, heighten your own social base, carry out to their logical issues your own principles and methods, and you will reach all that God requires of man.

If it be urged that God gave the criminal his organisation, the objection does not touch the argument. The argument is, that in human consciousness the plea of fatalism is ignored on all practical matters; away beyond all written statutes there is a conviction that man can regulate his actions, and ought to be held responsible for such regulation: man himself thus, by his own conduct and his own laws, acquits God of all charge upon this matter; the very recognition by the magistrate, of man's responsibility, is itself a direct acquittal of God from the accusations of fatalism. God need not be interrogated upon the subject, for the magistrate himself, faithful to the consciousness of universal humanity, treats the fatalistic theory as an absurdity.

The practical issue of the argument, then, is that in human consciousness and experience it is a settled principle that men are responsible to each other, and that the doctrine of social irresponsibility is a lie; so that without opening the Bible, we find this principle recognised by man the individual, man the proprietor, and man the magistrate. Revelation does not establish a new law—does not impose upon man an obligation foreign to his nature; but, on the contrary, takes human consciousness as it is, and educates and sanctifies the moral instincts. Where, then, is the unreasonableness of the scriptural doctrine of responsibility? Any other doctrine would directly antagonise the consciousness, the experience, and the magisterial instincts of the race, and therefore must presumptively be untrue; but this doctrine appeals to the profoundest consciousness of human nature, finds in that a witness to its own reasonableness, and is therefore presumptively true. It may be concluded, then, that on the question of moral obligation to God, revelation simply interprets, exalts, and sanctifies the consciousness and experience of the world.

## Chapter viii.-ix.

### ACCUSATIONS AND PENALTIES.

THESE chapters are full of accusation. The point is, that the accusation was not directed against heathen nations ; it is hurled against the chosen of God. There is a certain kind of accusation in which there is comfort. Where the indictment is severe, it is evident that the expectation has been high, and God never expects much except where he has sown much. Therefore it may come to pass that the very gravity and poignancy of the accusation may be suggestive of real comfort, and may form a ground of hope, provided that the divine conditions of return be acknowledged and realised. The collapse was almost fatal :—

“Why then is this people of Jerusalem slidden back by a perpetual backsliding ? they hold fast deceit, they refuse to return ” (viii. 5).

We can hardly tell how much is expressed in the original terms, “a perpetual backsliding,”—that is to say, a multiplication of backsliding ; one within another, and one beyond another, the whole proceeding as if by geometrical figure and arithmetical progression. It is not a slip that is indicated, a momentary lapse ; it is a banqueting in evil, a licking of the lips after a savoury feast at the table of the devil. We cannot tell how it looked to heaven. This we know, that the language of the text would never have been employed if the circumstances had not been provocative of so complete an impeachment. But the accusation is not in general terms only ; it is therefore detailed ; instead of the solid sentence we have the sharp line ; we have the iniquity item by item, each like a pointed instrument. Let us see :—

“I hearkened and heard [*Lit.* I listened to hear], but they spake not aright” (viii. 6).

The figure is a graphic and vivid one ; it is that of the divine Being stooping from heaven, and with inclined ear listening

critically yet hopefully to human speech, if mayhap there be but one bright word, one tone of music, one sigh of contrition. The Lord did not listen generally, promiscuously, as if listening to a confused noise of sound ; but he listened specifically, he tried every word, he detained every syllable, if haply he could detect in it one sound or sign that he might construe hopefully. But it was in vain. Even divinest kindness could make nothing but black ingratitude of all the energetic speech : it was a torrent of iniquity ; it was a river black, foul ; it was a rain of poison. God does not bring these charges against the human family lightly. What he would have said had there been one sign of penitence or reverence or desire after the true worship ! He would have forgotten all the blackness if he had seen one point of light. It is his delight to magnify that which is excellent. If any one man had prayed aright, he would have forgiven the world on that one man's account. If ten men had turned their faces hopefully to heaven, he would have spared the universe a century longer ; he would have disappointed gaping hell. But there was no encouragement. God can see flowers if there are any. He can see them before they open their mystery, and proclaim in fragrance their gospel ; he knows where they are sown and planted. But he looked, and there was none ; he expected, and was struck to the heart with disappointment ; " no man repented him of his wickedness, saying, What have I done ? " There was no self-cross-examination. When men cease to soliloquise they cease to pray. The hardest witness man undertakes to interrogate is his own soul. Yet philosophy has found out the advantages of self-inquest. The Pythagoreans asked themselves once a day, " What have I done ? " The inquiry creates a space in the day for itself, makes one inch of praying-ground in the desert of the day's life. How few men dare probe themselves with that inquiry ! It is a question double-edged. It is recorded of Cicero, in pressing one of his accusations against an adversary, that he told that adversary that if he had but put two words to himself he might have cooled his passion, controlled his desires, and turned his impulses to high utility. Said the orator, " If thou hadst said to thyself, *Quid ego ?* thou mightest have stopped thyself in this tremendous assault." That is, What have I done ? What do I ? What is my course ? What are the facts of the case ?

A man has to fight the great battle for himself. It is useless to be holding great controversies outside whilst yet the heart itself is in tumult and rebellion and disorder of every kind. This is what Jesus Christ means when he says a man must hate his own life. The word that thus comes to point a climax might have been laid down as the foundation of an argument; for no man can hate his father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife until he first hates his own life—puts it right within, gets hold of things by the right end, and governs all things by one dominant and solemn meaning. How stands the case now? Does any man put the question to himself once a day, What have I done? Every man should keep a diary—not perhaps a written journal; that may be mechanical: but there should be a diurnal inquest into purpose, thought, desire, intention,—what did it all mean? He who thus brings himself at dawn under discipline walks along a victor's path even until the sunset. But to have no right self-understanding, no grip of the soul itself, is to waste life, is to live a chance life, is to depend upon speculations and fortunes and accidents, and therefore to be stung by fatal disappointments.

What further occurred? The collapse was so complete that God asks this question,—

“Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination?” (viii. 12).

If so, there was hope of them. Did any one man blush? Not a soul. Is that mentioned in the accusation itself? Yes, it is written down here—“Nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush.” The Apostle Paul speaks of some men who were “past feeling.” That is but a Greek expression for this Hebrew charge. They could not blush, they had lost the power of being ashamed; they walked in such complete familiarity with evil that it became a kind of native sphere and native speech, and words came easily which should not have come at all. Let us take care lest we mistake hardness for innocence. A man may become so familiar with intemperance that he does not know when he is intemperate; yea, he may think so little of his own excesses as to be very severe upon the immeasurably less excesses of other men. Iniquity has its mysteries. Wickedness has its secret philosophy. A man may live so constantly with



the devil that he may not know how nearly he is transfigured into the infernal image. Mark the inquiry—"Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination?" If any man faltered, stammered, halted, blushed, that man might have been saved; but he walked over the ground of evil with wonderful familiarity with the awful place, and he spake the language of that country as if he had been born in its climate. Thus the impeachment rolls on, from point to point, from line to line. And God says:—

"Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered" (viii. 22).

This may be read in two ways—as an inquiry charged with pity, or as an inquiry which shows that even Gilead itself is unable to touch such wounds as have been self-inflicted. "Is there no balm in Gilead?" is first of all a local reference. There was a balsam tree in Gilead, the juice of which was supposed to be able to heal all wounds. In an early translation of the Bible the word "balm" is rendered "triale," whence we have the English "treacle,"—is there no balsam, no triacle, no treacle, in Gilead? So precious was it that it was only to be found in the gardens of the king. The balm did not grow elsewhere in Gilead. It was a king's plant, a royal treasure, a peculiar blessing. A very sensitive plant, too. It did not know iron; if so much as iron touched it, it shrank like a wounded thing and died like that which is afflicted with despair. This tree must be incised with wood or bone or glass; and so efficacious was the balm against contusions and wounds, that it obtained a reputation as the healing balsam; and the voice now rings out, "Is there no balm in Gilead?"—is the disease too bad for Gilead's balsam? That is possible. It is possible to foster the disease, to increase its virulence, that no mineral, no vegetable, no balm made of either or or both, can touch its deadliness. Surely that is a state of extremity in which a man has so treated his flesh that all the remedies of science fall back and say, We cannot touch so awful a disease as that. The figure is that we may outdo the very love of God in sin. Blessed be God, that is in one sense impossible; but only impossible because of God, not because of ourselves. We are cunning artificers in evil. We have written down numerous

things we could do without man knowing that they are being done. We are wits in evil; we are sharp in all moral invention that tends towards the soul's destruction; we have a genius of apostasy; we can always do something worse. Then comes this word: "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved"—words that are often misunderstood. They mean that a time had been specially set for God's redemption and for providential deliverance, and the time prophesied had come and gone, and there was no sign from heaven. The words, however, are capable of a very tender moral application that may not be strictly grammatical and yet is strictly human and evangelical. It is possible to get through the summer without being saved.

It is possible so to trample underfoot the harvest as to have no bread in winter. The season comes like an offered gospel—first a gospel of labour that should be profitable; then a gospel of result that should be hopeful, which soon will be realised—for we must not reap or pluck too soon; then a gospel of fruition, abundance, a very harvest of realisation. The text may be so used as to represent a soul saying, I have had my seedtime chance, my summer opportunity, my harvest offers; I have let them all go by, and now I cannot eat the ice or drink the snow or live upon the cold wind; it is gone, the opportunity is over: what can I do with the inhospitableness of winter?

Such being the accusation, what are the punishments?

"And death shall be chosen rather than life by all the residue of them that remain of this evil family, which remain in all the places whither I have driven them, saith the Lord of hosts" (viii. 3).

That is the extremity of human sorrow. Who does not cling to life? Ask men who have but little comfort in life why they cling to existence. The mystery is that they do cling to it. Life is a mystery of fascination, not to be explained in words: "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." The people who cling to life under such circumstances do not cling to this passing day,—that is the immediate point of time they hate; but they cling to the wraith called to-morrow, the spectral time, that cloudy sign in the heavens; and they turn thought and phenomenon into this

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\* See also *post*, p. 374.

meaning—I will bring you release ; I have corn with me and wine and oil ; wait until I come, and even you shall feast and be strong. And the wraith comes, the spectre is turned into To-day, and is as prosaic and disappointing as the day that is gone ; yet there is always a to-morrow, always a door ajar, always a gate that swings a little, and may open on the right side. Thus men cling to life, and will not die. But the time shall come, according to the prophetic word, when death shall be chosen rather than life ; and the time comes, according to the Apocalyptic word, when men shall seek death and not find it ; they shall desire to die, and death shall flee away.

Who can search the judgments of God ? Who can set forth in order all the resources of penal justice ? Better draw the curtain, better pray ; for it is God's delight to chase away all such blackness, and to enthrone the sun in the meridian, and to give the earth all its dowry of light. Then again :—

“Behold, I will send serpents, cockatrices, among you, which will not be charmed, and they shall bite you, saith the Lord ” (viii. 17).

That word “bite” poorly represents a word that can never be translated. And the serpent shall be a cockatrice of which all other serpents are themselves afraid. Not the ordinary crawling serpent, but one that lifts itself up from its own centre, and being half-erect sends out its influences, so that trees are blighted by the cruel breath, and men but looking at the figure die, and all nature within the range of the perilous activity feels paralysed and sad at heart. There are countries that are desolated by animals ; there have been harvests eaten by locusts ; there have been vineyards stripped by insects ; there is, therefore, no violence in the figure, and there is nothing of the nature of exaggeration. The animals have one keeper. God can make them live where he likes. The sight of that cockatrice might make a man almost pray. It would turn many a blustering blatant sinner in the city into a coward if he could but once catch sight of it on the counting-house floor ; then any prophet would be welcome who could charm the evil thing. But this cockatrice will not be charmed. It will look with proud disdain upon your traps and snares and gins, and all your offered flatteries, and all your bribes to its cruel dignity ; it has come to do God's judgment work, and it will

not accept the compromise the sinner proposes. These words are full of sadness, full of horribleness : but we must be horrible before we can be gracious ; we must know what the law is before we can know what the gospel is ; we must preach—oh, sad confession, and hurtful to a dainty and irrational sentimentality !—we must preach hell, if haply men may, by the terror of the Lord, be brought to know the meaning of his grace. Ask not the grammarian to explain these metaphorical passages. Do not let your fancy take hold of the mere rhetoric of the text ; but let your conscience get hold of its moral significance, its spiritual purpose, and that is easy of translation, namely, that God would charm us, frighten us, lure us, beckon us, or drive us out of sin. The purpose of God is to dislodge us from places of so-called refuge that our wickedness has chosen that we may be brought into the infinite and inviolable sanctuary of his protection.

“And they will deceive every one his neighbour, and will not speak the truth : they have taught their tongue to speak lies, and weary themselves to commit iniquity” (ix. 5).

In ancient fable one man rebukes another for building a house upon the ground rather than upon wheels ; for, said he, suppose the time should ever come when you should distrust your neighbour, how can you get away from him if your house be rooted in the ground ? whereas, had your house been erected upon wheels, you might have moved away from the circuit of his influence. The time will come when every one will deceive his own neighbour, play tricks with the man next door, cheat his own flesh and bone. We read of the Italians having a peculiar pocket-stone bow, which can be covered with a cloak, and behind it a man can be darting needles into the body of his adversary that should wound the vitals and yet scarcely leave a distinguishable mark on the flesh. What is that but a common, vulgar species of murder or assassination compared with this : “They will deceive every one his neighbour, and will not speak the truth” ? They will tell lies to their brethren, they will shoot out these deadly needles into the souls of men, and all the while look complacent, fraternal, benignant. Terrific is the power of human iniquity. “They have taught their tongue to speak lies ;” they have become rhetoricians in falsehood ; they have said, *Speak this lie trippingly on the tongue.* They know when to

whisper their evil message, and when to thunder their false declarations, and when by over-positiveness to make their lie the more obvious. There are skilled tongues; there is a cultured eloquence of falsehood.

### What is the punishment?

"Therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will feed them, even this people, with wormwood, and give them water of gall to drink. I will scatter them also among the heathen, whom neither they nor their fathers have known: and I will send a sword after them, till I have consumed them" (ix. 15, 16).

If there is to be challenge—which God forbid—heaven will not decline the combat. What can he do who fights a fire with straw? What can an arm of flesh do against heaven's artillery? Is the Church as wicked now? Who dare answer that question? Are punishments as numerous and solemn? Certainly. Is our harvest past, is our summer ended? No. We are in the very middle of our opportunities: "Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation;" "If ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, as in the day of temptation in the wilderness." May men pray this very moment? Yes. Is it needful to pray long? No. What prayer will do? This: "God be merciful to me a sinner." Is that enough? Quite: but only enough when spoken with the heart, when spoken at the Cross, when sobbed rather than articulated. Is the punishment now done? No:—

"For death is come up into our windows, and is entered into our palaces, to cut off the children from without, and the young men from the streets" (ix. 21).

How graphic is this picture! We have bolted the doors so that death cannot enter; we have opened the windows so that we may not be without fresh air; and, behold, death is climbing towards the open casement. "Though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not be unpunished." God knows all our arrangements, and accommodates his penal visitations to them. Oh that men were wise, that they understood these things!

We might treat all this as ancient history, if we did not feel its modern application—if we did not know that nothing can be

changed here except it be the mere metaphor, the mere clothing of words. The inner meaning is the same. The accusation of shortcoming or falsehood, of hardness of heart, abides, and takes the expression of the language of every country as sufficient to indicate the gravity and completeness of the impeachment. The punishment is signified by Hebrew figures and local circumstances, but the punishment itself is not changed. There is still a cockatrice in the conscience ; there is still a bite as of iron teeth through the very centre of the heart ; there is still that spectre by the bedside at midnight which opens its armoury of teeth and says nothing, but looks—looks—looks ! There is still that most terrible shadow that comes across the feast, so that the choicest mouthful is full of sickness and every enjoyment becomes a surfeit, and the banquet ends in satiety ; there is still that dislike of solitude, because when we sit alone a black figure comes and sits by our side, and says nothing, but looks—looks—looks ! There is that dead face, that broken heart, that lie half a century old, that fraud, so successful that we banked ten thousand pounds through it five-and-twenty years ago. The air is full of damnation. Fools are they who change the word and make a quarrel about adjectives and qualifying terms, when they are called upon to deal with the inner and unchangeable reality. God shall judge, thou whited sepulchre !

But does the whole speech end in accusation ? It God has piled accusation heaven-high, it is that he may come over it as over a mountain to preach a gospel to us. Though your sins be as scarlet, though they be as crimson, though they be as blackest night sevenfold, they can be treated, they can be met ; you can be born again, a little child, and taken by Christ into his arms, and kissed and blessed, and set down again to go about life's business with a new heart and a new hope. "Fly abroad, thou mighty gospel !"



## Chapter viii. 20.

"The harvest is past."

### HARVEST HOME.

**T**HEN no change can be made now—"The harvest is past." We should like to increase it, we cannot—"The harvest is past." Then there are measured opportunities in life, times of limitation, times of beginning and ending. Even now there are little circles not complete. The universe is a circle, eternity is a circle, infinity is a circle; these can never be completed, they live in continual progress towards self-completion: but there are little circles, small as wedding-rings, that can be quite finished,—the day is one, the year is one, the seasons constitute four little circles, each of which can be completed, turned off, sent forward with its gospel or its cry and confession of penitence and failure. "The harvest is past"; the barn door is shut, the granary is supplied: it is either full or empty; one or the other, there it is. We cannot get rid of these views of doom. We light a thousand candles, but we cannot illuminate the whole landscape of life. "Hope springs eternal in the human breast:" so the poet tells us, and so our own consciousness testifies; and yet we know behind all this illumination there is a voice of doom. The doom may be good: there is no reason why the word "doom" should always be held to be so solemn as to be appalling; by "doom" we mean settled, determined, fixed. There are those who would try to persuade the young that after all the sun is but a momentary blessing, and when he is gone there will be as good as he come up again. There is no authority for saying so; history does not confirm that foolish verdict, experience has nothing to say in corroboration of that wild suggestion. Scripture bases its appeals on a totally different view, saying, Work while it is called day, the night cometh

wherein no man can work ; in the morning sow thy seed, in the evening withhold not thy hand. The whole Biblical appeal is towards immediacy of action : "Buy up the opportunity" is the Gospel appeal to the common sense of the world.

"The harvest is past." Then we are or we are not provided for the winter. It is of no use repining now. Harvest finds the food, winter finds the hunger. We know this in nature : we have no difficulty about this in all practical matters, as we call them,—as if spiritual matters were not practical, whereas they are the most practical and urgent of all. When the harvest is past the character of winter is settled, so far as enjoyment, security, plenteousness are concerned. There is a seedtime in life ; there is in nature. Where men get authority for saying that you can neglect seedtime and still have an excellent harvest, or if you sow wild oats you will reap the most luscious grapes,—where they get their authority for saying so we cannot tell. There is no authority for it in the Bible ; we do not know that there is any authority for it in the fields. Neglect the fields, and the harvest will come up somehow ! That is a fool's gospel. We are bounded by law, we are imprisoned by law, we are caged in by the bars of natural ordinance and inflexible appointment : what if all this be true in its wider and broader sense in all matters intellectual, spiritual, and eternal ? The Bible says, He that neglects his spring shall have nothing in harvest, and nothing in winter. Is that true ? It must be true : it is one of those things that are self-evidencing. We speak of the axioms of geometry, we say that an axiom is a self-evidencing truth ; the moment it is stated, men say, That must be so. That is what we mean by an axiom in geometry ; this is an axiom in natural life : He that neglects seedtime shall beg in harvest, and beg in winter. What is the good of turning nature into a mother or friend that can ripen and grow for us a harvest in December ? Why not accept nature, and obey her annually published ordinances ? Why not reason from nature to spirit, and say, If it be so in things natural, that there is a seedtime, and that the harvest depends upon it, there may also be a corresponding truth in the spiritual universe : hear it : "Be not deceived ; God is not mocked : for whatsoever a man soweth, that

shall he also reap." It is his own harvest, he must put into it his own sickle.

The harvest may be very plentiful, and yet very much may depend upon the way in which it is gathered. The farmer is a continual puzzle to the merchant. The merchant somehow imagines himself to be at all events a sharper man. His motto is—to get things done. That is the motto. Whereas, the farmer seems to say, We will get in the corn by-and-by. He has a week of beautiful sunshine, and still he never touches his hay, and in another week it rains deluges, and he complains of the uncertainty of the weather. He might have got all the hay in last week, but he did not. He is a man contemplative; he partakes of the nature of his environment, he is leisurely. To see a farmer in a hurry! Some people do not know when to gather the harvest in any department of life; they have their opportunities and never see them. Others spend so much time in whetting their sickle that the corn is never cut at all. Others spend so much time in contemplating the golden fields that they forget that the fields were intended to be cut down and the fruits thereof garnered for the winter. Many a man has had an excellent harvest who has never cut it down. He did not know the harvest when he saw it. God has given us everything we need, and all we want; but we must find the sagacity that discerns the situation, we must find the common-sense that notes the beginning, continuance, and culmination of the opportunity. Why have our little smart apothegms, as "Make hay while the sun shines"? Who would be wise in hay but a fool in spiritual education? Say of this poor idiot, None so clever in hay-gathering, but he lost his soul!

A meditation of this kind brings several points before us that may be regarded profitably and applied usefully to our whole life. For example, there is brought before us the time of vain regrets—"The harvest is past." The coach has gone on, and we have missed it; the tide flowed, and we might have caught it, but we have waited so long that it has ebbed. We neglected our opportunities at home, we were disobedient, unfilial, hard-hearted, and now we stand at the gate-post and cry our hearts out, because we

had not a chance of doing something for the father and the mother whom we neglected in their lifetime. Cry on! for such folly, madness, ingratitude, there is no repentance. We wish we had made more of God's minister: what times we might have enjoyed, what openings of heaven we might have seen, what upliftings of soul there were that would have carried us to heaven's beautiful gate; and we were in the house of God like oxen, dull, stupid, unresponsive; not knowing music, not understanding that in the words that were spoken to us there were more than human tones,—a solemn ineffable music meant to reach the heart and redeem the life. Cry on! The old prophet-pastor is dead. You cared nothing for him while he was living. You can never hear him again. Oh the time of vain regrets!—that we should have spoken that cruel word; that we should have been guilty of that base neglect; that we should have been lured away from paths of loveliness and peace by some urgent temptation; that we should have done a thousand things which now rise up against us as criminal memories! They are vain regrets. You can never repair a shattered crystal, so that it shall be as it was at first; you can never take the metal, the iron, out of the pierced wood, and really obliterate the wound. A nail cut is never cured. The old may hear these words with dismay, the young should hear them as voices of warning. If you sow neglect, you will reap vain regret. We always reap more than we sow. That is a mystery, but it is a fact. You sow an ear of corn, and it grows up quite a little field of wheat; you sow it again, and it multiplies itself, in some cases thirty, some sixty, and some an hundredfold. Every act we sow may come up a habit. An act is accidental, incidental, self-complete it may be, but a habit lays itself all over and all around the soul like a chain. You do not sow what you reap in quantity, but in quality you do. You threw in ever so little, and it has come up so much: why that is according to the very nature you profess to worship. If there were no Bible, that would be true. If a man sowed a handful of wheat and only got a handful of corn back again, he would never sow any more: it is because he got back so much more than he sowed that next year he will enlarge his acreage and sow more abundantly. If so in nature, if thus in the field, why complain if it be thus and so in the character, in

the soul, in the destiny? You sowed but a handful of wicked deeds, and it will take you eternity to reap the black harvest. If in nature you had sowed a handful or two of corn, and a whole field of wheat had grown out of the sowing, you would have said, This is excellent: are you now going to turn round and say when your harvest exceeds your seedtime, This is unjust?

Such points bring before us also the times of honest satisfaction. Blessed be God, there are times when we may be really moved to tears and to joy by contemplating the results of a lifetime. The hard-working author says, I have written all this; God gave me strength and guided my hand, and now when I look back upon these pages it is like reading my own life over again; I do not know how it was done, God taught my fingers this mystery of labour. And the honest merchantman has a right to say in his old age, God has been good to me, he has enabled me to lay up for what is called a rainy day, he has prospered my industry, he has blessed me in basket and in store,—praise God from whom all blessings flow! You have a right to enjoy your harvest. You have worked hard. No man ever found you going out after the clock struck. You were there on the spot; many a time you waited for the sun, and almost gave him a hint to be a little quicker in his action; and now the day of labour is closed you have a right to say, God gave me all these things; I am in the time of old age, and now that I see love, honour, obedience, and troops of friends, all the things that ought to accompany old age, I will rejoice as they rejoice who gather in the harvest.

How are we going to treat our own harvests? We can treat them in three different ways. There are men who treat everything as a mere matter of course. They are not men to be trusted; they are not men to be revered: keep no company with them, they will never elevate your thought, or expand and illuminate your mind, or give a richer bloom to your life. We dismiss them because we condemn them. There is another way of receiving the harvest which our Lord himself condemned parabolically: "I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up

for many years ; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry." And the Lord said unto him, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee : then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided ?" What about the barns ? what about the stored granaries ? The man never said what he would do for the poor, the famishing, and the sad-hearted ; he never said, God has given me all these things, and to his glory I will consecrate them. Therefore he was called fool, and the granary that was filled in the morning was locked against its own owner in the night-time ; the man who was going to eat and drink abundantly to-morrow was drowned in the river of night. Are we going to receive our harvests in that way, or is there not a method more excellent ? We may receive our harvests gratefully, claiming no property in them beyond the right of honest labour. See the harvestman : he says, I sowed for this ; thank God I have got it ; I meant my fields to be plentiful, I spent myself upon them, I did not work in them as a hireling, but I worked in them as a man who loved them, and here are the fruits, blessed be God : here, Lord, is thy tithe, thy half, here is God's dole ; he shall have a handful of this wheat, anyhow ; he won't take it, but the poor shall have it ; the harvest is only mine to use in God's interest. "Honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase : so shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst with new wine." "There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth ; there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty." "He which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully." God has given me all this harvest, and I must give him his due. You will get more out of your fields if you cultivate them yourselves. A man cannot cultivate any other man's field. He can work in it, he can do a day's work in it, and get his wages when he has done, but he cannot cultivate it. It is wonderful how ingenious a man becomes when the thing he is doing is his own. You ask a friend to do something for you, and there are friends who have a genius in suggesting how the thing cannot be done. Their fertility in suggesting negatives is ineffable. Propose that if they do it they shall have a handful of money for every step that is successful, and they will say, "Yes—well—possibly—I'll do it !" Oh, money is a wonderful power for waking people up ! And it



is natural, it is philosophical, it is morally right. You never do for another man what you could have done for yourself if the work had been yours. "The hireling fleeth because he is an hireling." The hireling soul is a cemetery. How much you could do if you liked! I hold that every man can do just what he has a mind to do. You could attend a church ten miles from your home every Sunday morning at 9 o'clock if you wanted to do it; but not wanting to do it—oh! It would be perfectly amazing to see how a policy of the kind I am about to name would work. Five pounds will be given to every man who is in St. Paul's Cathedral next Sunday morning at 8 o'clock. How many men would be there? Will you guess two? Try again. What you could do if you wanted to do it, if your soul were in it!

Thank God we may turn wholly from this aspect of the case and say that with most of us it is only seedtime. Behold the young in the morning, the dewy dawn of their life: with them it is seedtime. Things done now will come up again, and you must face the upcoming. Every man must confront his own harvest. And as for those of you who think that you have toiled for nothing and spent your strength in vain—hush, man, the harvest is in heaven.

## Chapter ix. 23, 24.

"Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom : . . . but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth : for in these things I delight, saith the Lord."

### GLORYING.

**A**N idea in this text to which we assign special prominence is this,—There is at least so much similarity between the nature of God and the nature of man, that both God and man can take delight in the same thing. The spirit of the text is saying, Take delight in lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, because I take delight in them ; come up to my moral altitude ; place your affections where I place mine ; learn the divinity of your origin, and the possible splendour of your destiny, from the fact that you have it in your power to join me in loving mercy, righteousness, and judgment. This idea is increased in significance by the fact that the appeal is addressed to man in his depraved condition : that is, notwithstanding his guilt, weakness, and moral disintegration, there is enough of divinity in his shattered nature to enable him to harmonise with the voice of God in lauding and magnifying all that is true and pure and good. This idea, rightly understood, fills us with adoring wonder. It is God seeking the sympathetic companionship of man ; it is the Creator appealing to the creature to join him in the appreciation and service of moral excellence ; it is the King inviting and welcoming a disloyal subject to an abandoned throne ; it is the benignant Father identifying and honouring his own lineaments in the face of a rebellious and ruined child.

In the verses of which the text is a part, God addresses three divisions of the human family—the Wise, the Powerful, the Wealthy. And is there any other class which may not be placed

in one of these categories? Properly looked at, is not this division an exhaustive classification of the human race? It may, at all events, aid us in realising the spirit of the text if we keep this arrangement vividly before us. Here, for example, you have the devotees of science, philosophy, and art; they are the wise: there you have the plumed conquerors, and the crowned monarchs of immeasurable empires; they are the powerful: yonder you have the owners of the gold and silver, the proprietors of houses and land; they are the rich. Each class is sitting at the feet of its chosen idol—Science, Arms, Wealth; all clad in robes of royalty, if not of godhood. In the hand of each idol is the sceptre of a venerated mastery, and the temple of each shakes with a thunder of heathenish worship. Such is the picture. Now, to these temples God comes, and, with the majesty of omnipotence, the authority of infinite wisdom, and the benignity of all-sustaining fatherhood, says: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches."

"Glory!" That is a word which is pregnant with meaning; and it can be better explained by paraphrase than by etymology. Let not man "glory" in wisdom, might, and wealth, so as to be absorbed in their pursuit, so as to make a god of either of them, so as to regard them as the ultimate good, so as to commit to either his present happiness and endless destiny.

"Wisdom!" That, too, is a word fraught with large significance. The "wisdom" referred to is not that which cometh from above—beautiful with celestial hues, and instinct with celestial life: it is a "wisdom" which is destitute of the moral element; the "wisdom" of an inquisitive, prying, restless intellect; that eyeless and nerveless "wisdom" by which the world "knew not God," and which, when looked at from above, is "foolishness"; the "wisdom" which is all brain and no heart; the "wisdom" of knowledge, not of character; the "wisdom" which dazzles man, but which, when alone, is offensive to God.

"Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom." If we follow an earnest student of science totally dissociated from religion, the

meaning of the admonition may break upon us. His love of science amounts to a species of idolatry ; the hammer of geology and the telescope of astronomy are the instruments through which all his knowledge of the heavens and the earth comes. With unwearying diligence he collates facts and notes phenomena ; he estimates forces, weighs bodies, discovers laws, proclaims doctrines, with unabating enthusiasm ; he is acute, too, in the detection of subtle processes, and most sagacious in the interpretation of unusual combinations of circumstances ; every discovery fills him with passionate delight ; his very dreams are of greatness ; he is thrilled with the hope that presently the keys of the universe will be put into his hands, and not very far off is the glory of sitting on the dictator's throne and determining the philosophies of the world. A flash of benevolence, too, gleams through his lofty purposes ; for he says he will find out the causes of disease, and regenerate the physical nature of man ; he will discover the primal laws of mind, and so affect the entire mental economy of man as to make an everlasting end of all human perplexity ; in short, he will build a tower which shall rise unto heaven, and all nature shall lie at his feet, owning his perfect mastery, and declaring that every secret has been dislodged from her heart. Such are the ambitious intents of this youthful enthusiast. He goes to work with characteristic vigour ; he gains knowledge with marvellous rapidity ; his name attains eminence in scientific circles ; his works become the text-books of scholars, and everywhere he is regarded as a wise man. So far there is much to admire ; all his investigations, however, have been conducted just as you would explore a cathedral or temple whose architect and builder are dead and forgotten. Nowhere has he seen God. He has turned over a thousand pages in the great book which men call the universe, but his eyes have nowhere lighted upon God. Still, he is what is known as a wise man, and it is to such that God comes and says, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom." Such a man, in fact, has not begun the alphabet of true wisdom ; all the while he has been in the rudimentary region of knowledge. As for Wisdom, he has not seen her hiding-place ; he is but a well-informed fool, one who has not embraced and honoured wisdom. Where, then, "shall wisdom be found ? and where is the place of under-

standing? . . . The depth saith, It is not in me: and the sea saith, It is not with me. . . . Whence then cometh wisdom? and where is the place of understanding? . . . God understandeth the way thereof, and he knoweth the place thereof. For he looketh to the ends of the earth, and seeth under the whole heaven. . . . And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding."

One substantial reason for not glorying in the kind of wisdom which we have attempted to depict, is the necessary littleness of man's vastest acquisitions. The greatest men are ever the first to exclaim, "We are but of yesterday, and know nothing;" the most successful man of science, the man of peerless power, the man who has left his footprints on a wider track of the heavens and the earth than any other discoverer, comes laden with trophies, and as he lays them down in the museum, says: "Lo, these are parts of his ways; but how little a portion is heard of him! but the thunder of his power who can understand?" The higher he ascended, the more he realised his own insignificance; when he attained the outermost verge of his appointed sphere he felt that he could hardly touch the hem of the royal garment. Science is a race after God; but can the Infinite ever be overtaken? Science, perhaps, never got so close to God as when she bound the capitals of the world together with bands of lightning, and flashed the wisdom and eloquence of parliaments from continent to continent. High day of triumph that; she was within hand-reach of the veiled Potentate—one step more, and she would be face to face with the King—was it not so? What was there between Science and God in that moment of sublimest victory? Nothing, nothing, but—Infinity! "There is no searching of his understanding."

Another point will show the folly of glorying in the kind of wisdom we have delineated: viz., the widest knowledge involves but partial rulership. You say you have found a law operating in the universe. Be it so: can you suspend or reverse the divine appointment? We do not refer to those regions in which God has been pleased to give man a certain power, but to the great, the necessary laws of creation. Can you turn back the currents of virtue which are evermore streaming from the heart of God?

Can you, so to speak, amputate a limb from the vital organism, and keep it alive without connection with the Supreme Power? Can you place yourself at the tree-root, and tell the spring, which is advancing to clothe that tree with luxuriant foliage, that you can do without its services, and for once you will undertake to fabricate the verdurous garment with your own hand? Have you an arm like God? or can you thunder with a voice like him? The argument is this,—however extensive may be our knowledge, knowledge can only help us to obey; it never can confer aught but the most limited rulership; and even that sovereignty is the dominion not of lord, but of servant, the rulership which is founded in humility and obedience—the rulership whose seat is beneath the shadow of the Great Throne.

Is man, then, without an object in which to glory? It is as natural for man to glory as it is natural for him to breathe; and God, who so ordered his nature, has indicated the true theme of glorying: "But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me." Here let us rejoin the earnest student of science, supposing now that, in addition to his being ardently scientific, he is intelligently devout. He goes to work as before; the flame of his enthusiasm is not diminished by a single spark; his hammer and his telescope are still precious to him, but now, instead of being in pursuit of cold, abstract, inexorable laws, he is in search of the wise and mighty and benevolent lawgiver; in legislation he finds a legislator, and in the legislator he finds a Father. Let us watch him in one of his engagements. It has come to his knowledge that geology and Moses are at variance; he sinks a shaft and descends into the lower parts of the earth, that he may himself be present in the very arena of controversy; standing round the shaft we hear the ring of his hammer as it smites the rocks; for a time a chilling and blinding fear seizes our misgiving hearts, lest every blow struck at the rock should be a blow struck at the face of revelation, from which revelation can never recover; down he goes through formations (the geological name for cemeteries), through rocks which are tombstones: deeper and deeper he descends, getting farther and farther into mystery; now he looks at revelation, and anon he looks with anxiety at the rock; another blow and another look; his heart



palpitates with strange emotion, a terror too awful for speech makes his knees smite together : shall he strike again ? another stroke may dash the Bible out of men's already trembling hands—he pauses, he quivers, he weeps, he prays, and then—he strikes ! We await the issue with mysterious awe ; slowly he returns to the surface ; on his countenance are the traces of recent agony (such agony as mental warriors only know), in one hand he holds the hammer, in the other he grasps his Bible ; for a moment he cannot break the silence of his own wonder, his very gladness is too deep for words ; at length he lifts up his voice like a trumpet, and his contagious enthusiasm startles hallelujahs from every lip as he exclaims, “The word of the Lord endureth for ever !” And it is in that hour (holy and triumphant !) that God comes near and says, “Let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me,” and then places on the head of the devout student a diadem whose splendour eclipses the brightness of congregated suns.

Man's glorifying, then, is to be restrained until he reaches the “Me,” the personality, the living one : for example, you have found a law, be glad ! speedily you find another law which confirms it, still be glad ; your discoveries multiply, your museum is crowded with the memorials of brilliant conquests, still be glad, but do not “glory” ; now put all your discoveries and conquests together—connect the triumphs of your skill, and tell us what they spell ? Read aloud ! Let men and angels hear ! You answer that, having put all together, the word which they constitute is God ! Now glory ! Now shout for gladness ! Now make a joyful noise unto the Rock of salvation ; and if any cold-hearted, sneering, unsympathetic brother should demand the reason of your joy, put your finger on this warrant and answer, “Let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me.”

What we want, then, is personal knowledge of a Person : we would know not only the works, but the author, for they are mutually explanatory. Know the man if you would understand his actions ; know God if you would comprehend nature, providence, or grace. The devout student says he finds God's foot-

prints everywhere; he says they are on the rocks, across the heavens, on the heaving wave, and on the flying wind; to him, therefore, keeping company with science is only another way of "walking with God." Science becomes a wise and reverent guide, opening doors just far enough (for it can never do more than set the door ajar) to give him a glance at the milder glories of the Eternal King; and does he in return offer oblations to Science? Does he mistake the guide for the Sovereign? Nay! he thanks Science as you would thank one who had led you to a position whence you could contemplate "such a light as never shone on land or sea." Science is nothing to the devout student, except so far as it brings him nearer God; he must find not only the writing, but the writer; not only the voice, but the speaker: as Science conducts him through the innumerable chambers of creation, he exclaims, "My heart crieth out for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?" Science may be an astronomer, but who wrote the glittering page which she attempts to decipher? Science may be a geologist, but who moulded the planet whose birthday she is ever anxious to determine? Science may be a botanist, but who traced the lines of beauty which she attempts to interpret? Science may be a metaphysician, but who constructed the mind, into whose mysteries she would penetrate? Science may be an agriculturist, but if God withhold the dew, only that, Science herself will die of thirst! Thus is the devout student continually reverting to the "who"; he "glories," not in the architecture, but in the architect—not in the ladder on which angels travel, but in the God against whose heart the head of that ladder rests.

The text, however, goes still farther; it relates not only to personality, but to character: the deist pauses at the former, the Christian advances to the latter: "Let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth." The idea would admit of some such expression as this: Any knowledge of God, the Creator and Legislator of the physical creation, should be regarded as merely preparatory, or subordinate to an apprehension of God as the Moral Governor: that if you know God as Creator only, you can hardly be said

to know him at all; that if you tremble at his power without knowing his mercy, you are a pagan; if you seek to please him as a God of intelligence, without recognising him as a God of purity and justice and love, you are ignorant of him, and your ignorance is crime. Let him that glorieth, even glorieth in God, glory in knowing God as a moral Being, as the righteous Judge, as the loving Father. There must not be adoration of mere power; we must not be satisfied with utterances of amazement at his majesty, wisdom, and dominion; we must go farther, get nearer, see deeper; we must know God morally, we must feel the pulsations of his heart—his heart!—that dread sanctuary of righteousness, that sempiternal fount of love.

The meaning may be seen more clearly by listening to an evangelical man of science as he addresses a deist: You, he says, are amazed at God, as he walks on the wings of the wind, as he preserves the organisation of nature in perfect order, swaying his sceptre throughout boundless dominions from age to age; now, I am as amazed as you are, and as reverent, but I go farther: I adore his power, I also recognise his righteousness; I am lost in his wisdom, but I see that wisdom quite as much in the arrangements of the moral world as in the mechanism of the heavens; you see him enkindling suns, I also see him enkindling hope in the breast of desolation; you see him moulding globes, I also see him drying the tears of sorrow; you see him controlling the terrible forces of creation, and I also see him grasping the orphan's hand, and leading the blind by a way they know not; you see him marshalling countless populations (populations distinct as the mountains but one as the globe), I also see him putting his hands on little children, and crowning them with the diadem of his blessing; you see him in the earthquake, the fire, the tempest, and you say, "Behold his might!" I see him in his incarnate Son, dying on Calvary, and say, "This is the power of God."

He only knows God who knows him as the God which exerciseth lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. Science can never reveal the full-orbed Godhead. Science can only stand in the outer court, begging for the crumbs which fall from the banquet-table. Science can only see through a glass

darkly. Science can never weave for herself a wedding garment which will entitle her to a place at the feast. Hear it and believe ; it must be love that enters into the inner court—it must be love that takes a child's seat—it must be love that sees face to face—it must be love on whose shoulder is found the nuptial badge. It is true, in the widest possible sense, that, "he who loveth not knoweth not God ; for God is love." Love is its own microscope, love is the wise interpreter ; sympathy can see farther than the telescope ; the door of God's innermost chamber flies back at the appeal of love.

If we are justified, then, in so rendering the text as to draw the doctrine that he only who knows God morally knows God truly, there is one all-important warning to be given : viz., you can only attain a moral knowledge by a moral process ; that is to say, you can never rectify your relations to God by any other method than that which God himself has appointed, and that method is a moral one. No man can be saved on account of his great wisdom, or on account of anything in himself ; the proudest philosopher must come to the same point as the unlettered peasant ; both must come as little children to the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, and "count all things loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus the Lord." Science can give no passport to immortality ; science can give no guarantee of safety : "this is life eternal, to know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."

Is there a more melancholy spectacle than that of a man of science who is ignorant of God's moral nature, and who is, consequently, wandering into outer darkness ? What answer can he render to the accusations which must eventually fall upon all who know not the true God ? He has spent his life in exploring the temple, but never turned a loving eye to the God whose glory fills it ; he has penetrated a thousand rocks, but knows not the Rock of Ages ; he has questioned innumerable orbs, but never communed with the Bright and Morning Star ; he is familiar with every flower which adorns the coronal of spring, but never owned the Rose of Sharon. Here is the worst of Ignorance—here is an insanity which the holiest spirits mourn.

Is not such a man laying up wrath against the day of wrath? Will not every rock, every star, every flower, every law of nature, become an avenging force, and smite the man who spent a life in God's temple without even knowing that God delighted in lovingkindness, righteousness, and judgment? It must be so. The universe is in sympathy with its Creator, and having given up enough for the safety and joy of the good, all the rest would flame into a hell rather than the neglecters of God should be living witnesses that the throne of judgment has been abandoned.

The whole subject, then, may be comprehended in four points. (1) God brands all false glorying.—Upon the head of wisdom, power, and wealth, he writes, "Let no man glory in these." There is a wisdom which is folly; there is a power which is helplessness; there is a wealth which is poverty. God warns us of these things, so that if our boasted wisdom answer us not when we are on the Carmel of solemn encounter between light and darkness, we may not have God to blame; so that if our power crumble away in the day of battle, we may remember the divine communication; so that if our wealth be scorned in the extremities of our want, we may hear the voice which branded it as a false security! Each—wisdom, power, wealth—has its place,—each is precious,—each, properly employed, is beneficial; but when substituted for God the avenging fire falls upon them, and our defences are reduced to dust. (2) God has revealed the proper ground of glorying.—That ground is knowledge of God, not only as Creator and Monarch, but as Judge and Saviour and Father. Reason, groping her way through the thickening mysteries of creation, may exclaim, "There is a God;" but faith alone can see the Father smiling through the King. It will be in vain to say, "Lord, Lord," if we cannot add, "Saviour, Friend." Men do not enter heaven because they have seen the shadow of the Sovereign, but because they have embraced and loved and served the Saviour. (3) God, having declared moral excellence to be the true object of glorying, has revealed how moral excellence may be attained.—Is it objected that there is no mention of Jesus Christ in the text? We answer, that lovingkindness, righteousness, and judgment are impossibilities apart from

Christ ; they are only so many names to us, until Jesus exemplifies them in his life, and makes them accessible to us by his death and resurrection. Do we require the sun to be labelled ere we confess that he shines in the heavens ? As life, animal and plantal, is impossible without the sun, so are lovingkindness, righteousness, and judgment impossible without Christ. The proof is found in the experience of humanity in all ages ; all philosophers who know not Jesus might be summoned to attest the validity of the declaration. It is, then, through Christ, and through Christ alone, that we attain the celestial altitudes of mercy and righteousness and judgment. (4) God has revealed the objects in which he glories himself.—“For in these things I delight, saith the Lord.” Let it be propounded as a problem, “In what will the Supreme Mind most delight ?” and let it be supposed that an answer is possible, it might be concluded that the attainment of that answer would for ever determine the aspirations, the resolutions, and the ambition of the world. We might consider that every other object would be infinitely beneath the pursuits, and infinitely unworthy of the affections of man. At all events, this must be true, that they who glory in the objects which delight Jehovah must be drinking at pure and perennial streams.

The voice of the text is—Glory in goodness. “God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.” All goodness is centred there ! That Cross is the sublimest revelation of infinite wisdom—the most magnificent embodiment of infinite love. Have we been led into its mystery ? Can we trace the meaning of the superscription ? Can we catch the significance of the phenomena ? Have we touched the flowing blood ? Have we flung the arms of our love around the holy Sufferer ? If we answer Yes, we are the true children of wisdom—the heirs of unwaning light. We may pursue science, conquer creation, lay nature at our feet ; but we must remember that to know everything but Jesus Christ is nothing but thinly disguised and ruinous insanity.



## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY God, we bless thee for Jesus Christ as a teacher sent from heaven. His words are words of life and power; they search the heart, they try the reins, of the children of men; they are sharper than a two-edged sword. We rejoice that thou dost enable us to submit ourselves to the searching criticism of Jesus Christ's word. We have been false to ourselves; we have concealed our true nature even from our own eyes; we have looked on the outside only; we have forgotten our inner life, the life of motive, of secret impulse, of purposes we dare not explain; we have looked only to our hand, when we ought to have examined the very life of our heart. But Jesus Christ, thy Son, doth not spare us; he searcheth us as with a candle; he kindleth upon us the flame of the Lord, and in the light of that fire he searches and tries us, and sees if there be any wicked way in us. We rejoice in the plainness and the vigour of his speech. We thank thee that Jesus Christ layeth the axe at the root of the tree; we bless thee for his radical teaching, for his going to the roots of all evil things, for his making the tree good that the fruit may be good, for his purifying the fountain that the stream may be pure. May we learn of Jesus Christ in these things, and seek to do thy will, not as man-pleasers, not with eye-service, but with all the simplicity of love, with all the strength of entire trust, honouring goodness for its own sake, and loving truth because it is the speech of God! Deliver us from all deceitfulness, all falsehood, all pretence, and enable us to serve thee in spirit and in truth; and out of a life based on godly sincerity, may there come works of love, pity, charity, and beneficence which shall bless all with whom we come in contact! Have mercy upon us wherein we have sinned. We have done the things we ought not to have done, and we have left undone the things that we ought to have done. We accuse ourselves. If the surface has been right the motive has been wrong; if our hand has been clean our heart has been leprous. Do thou wash us in the blood of Jesus Christ, shed for the sins of men,—the sacrificial blood which is our propitiation, our plea, and our answer before God! Let thine own people glory in the truth, feel its power, acknowledge its sovereignty, bless its giver. If there be before thee, or shall come within the influence of our word to-night, any man who is hypocritical, who seeks to cover up his real state from the eye of society and from the eye of his own conscience, apply thy word to such as a flame of fire, finding its way into the secret chambers of the soul and lighting up the darkest recesses of the life. Make us glad in the Lord! In the world we have mortification, disappointment, tears, broken staves piercing our hands, much sorrow, great difficulty. But in God's house, on God's day, gathered as we are around God's book, surely thy children shall not plead in vain for the gladness which comes of thy presence. Amen.

## Chapter x. 3-5.

"For the customs of the people are vain : for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold ; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not. They are upright as the palm tree, but speak not : they must needs be borne, because they cannot go. Be not afraid of them ; for they cannot do evil, neither also is it in them to do good."

## THE GODS OF THE HEATHEN.

**B**EFORE coming to the exact subject of these verses, two or three particular points in the chapter as a whole will be found to be worthy of attention. The chapter is an address delivered to the house of Israel, which had been told that it was uncircumcised in heart, or on a level with the heathen nations around it ; the writer proceeds from a general indictment against Israel to prefer a special complaint—namely, that Israel was disposed to adopt the customs of heathen nations, and was not indisposed to accept the work of astrologers, stargazers, and monthly prognosticators (Isaiah xlvii. 13), and to find in all these phenomena portents of divine protection or judgment. "The customs of the people" is an expression which must not be supposed to refer merely to common usages : the reference is exclusively to religious institutions ; and by the words "the people" must not be understood Israel, but the heathen nations around them. When the gods are described as "upright as the palm tree" (ver. 5), the meaning is literally—"A pillar in a garden of gourds are they." The Hebrew word translated "pillar" we have already seen illustrated in Exodus xxv. 18, 31, 36. The reference is to the twisted palm-like columns of the Temple, and to these columns the stiff, formal figure of the idol is compared. The sixth verse opens with the words "forasmuch as" ; but the literal Hebrew is "none is there like unto thee." In the seventh verse we come upon the expression "king of nations," which ought to be rendered "king of the heathen," which expresses the universal sovereignty of Jehovah, in contrast with the mistaken impression that Jehovah was the God of the religious only. Again and again in Holy Scripture an effort is made to enlarge the idea of God so as to include within it infinite and universal sovereignty, and not the mere patronage

or defence of any particular people. In the eighth verse we find the words "the stock is a doctrine of vanities," which is somewhat obscure. The literal rendering would seem to be, "The teaching of vanities, or of idols, is a word, or is a log:" the meaning is—that is really all that vanities or idols come to; it is but a breath at the best; it is but a log of wood, dumb and useless, and for religious purposes to be despised. In the tenth verse the words "the Lord is the true God" are better rendered "Jehovah is the God that is Truth,"—truth in its sublimest and completest form. Jesus Christ says concerning himself, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Christ's application of many Old Testament titles and designations to himself is difficult to account for on the ground that he was a man only. The same verse gives the expression "an everlasting king": whilst this is not wrong, it is certainly inferior to the Hebrew idiom—"king of eternity." In the fifteenth verse the expression "the work of errors" should be amended by "a work of mockery."

Coming now to the section verses 3-5, we are reminded that it is often said of God that he is unknowable. It would seem as if this was advanced as a kind of reason for not concerning ourselves about him. The form into which this thought would be thrown is something like—If there is a God, he cannot be known by the human mind, and therefore we need not try to know him. It is remarkable, however, that the Bible distinctly warns us against gods which can be known; and, indeed, the very fact that they can be known is the strong reason given for distrusting and avoiding them. It is said that if we could know the true God it would be our duty to worship him; but the true God distinctly warns us that any god that can be known is by that very fact proved to be no god at all. The Bible even makes merry over all the gods that can be known. It takes up one, and says, with a significant tone, This is wood; another, and laughs at it as a clever contrivance in iron; another it takes up, and setting it down smiles at it as a pretty trick in goldsmithery: "One cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not." This is the Bible estimate of gods that can be known! "The carpenter

encouraged the goldsmith, and he that smootheth with the hammer him that smote the anvil, saying, It is ready for the sodering: and he fastened it with nails, that it should not be moved." Concerning the false gods of his time, Isaiah says (xlvi. 7), "They bear him upon the shoulder, they carry him, and set him in his place, and he standeth." Thus everything can be known about the false gods: we can walk round them; we can tell the very day of their manufacture; we can give their exact weight in pounds and ounces; we can set down their stature in feet and inches; we can measure them for a suit of clothes; we can change their complexion with a brush: because they are known they are contemptible. "They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: they have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: they have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat." "Woe unto him that saith to the wood, Awake; to the dumb stone, Arise, it shall teach! Behold, it is laid over with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in the midst of it."

In opposition to all this view of heathen deities stands the glorious revelation of the personality and nature of the true God. "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." "This is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." A conviction of the vital difference between the God of the Hebrews and the god of the heathen seems to have forced itself into the minds even of those to whom the true revelation had not come: "Their rock is not as our Rock, even our enemies themselves being judges"—Power is ascribed unto God—"Who among the sons of the mighty can be likened unto the Lord?"—Holiness also is ascribed unto the God of Israel—"Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy: . . . thy judgments are made manifest"—There would be nothing noteworthy in the ascription of mere power to God; but when his character is described, and is throughout a character of righteousness, holiness, purity, mercy, we come into the real difference as between the true God and all manufactured or imagined deities.

All human history would seem to show that men must have either a knowable or an unknowable God. Nearly all nations have gods of some kind. That is a fact which must not be lightly passed over in thinking deeply upon this subject. Even the meanest gods must be accounted for. They are not among the *a priori* probabilities of life. They trouble men; they turn down the light suddenly at the feast; they put a drag on the fast chariot; they are seldom welcome. Yet there they are, and men will have them, as if though they are troubled with them they would be infinitely more troubled without them. What is it that clings to some god-form? An easy answer is the word "Superstition"; but there is nothing in such a reply except its ease and flippancy. Superstition itself must be accounted for. Every thinking man has what to him is equivalent to a god. His thought stretched to the point of perplexity—because so much appeals to it that is beyond absorption or reconciliation—becomes to man a species of deity, or in other terms an unknown and bewildering quantity, which will not allow him to put a fullstop to his thinking, saying, Human life ends here, and beyond it there is no field of legitimate inquiry. On the other hand, a child loved to idolatry becomes very near to occupying the position of a god: or the expectation excited into a hope which throws a light upon the whole life, and oftentimes sets things in a wrong relation to one another, or alters the just perspective of life, may exercise such a fascinating influence upon thought and action as to usurp the place of personal sovereignty and intelligence: or there may be but a dream radiant with poetry, which a man accepts as a species of revelation, and by which he at least secretly hopes to realise great ambitions or sacred purposes: or there may be an intent in the heart so earnest as to exclude all other thoughts and to reign in the heart with religious influence, difficult to distinguish from profound and sacrificial worship: sometimes there is an enthusiasm which is akin to inspiration, which lifts men up into high raptures, and constrains them to enter into arduous endeavours of the most costly kind; an enthusiasm which almost challenges danger, which smiles at peril, and which counts a road to be right because there is a lion upon it at every turn: or we may go farther down, and amongst another quality of people find a totally different indication of religious instinct and desire:

we find lucky chance, the vulgar toss-up, and the vulgar desire that the right side may come down. Be it what it may, either a high conception or a low, it would seem as if we must find some equivalent to God, either in the fog of chance, the temple of art, or the sanctuary of revelation.

Even false gods put their devotees to great expense in their service. Take the man who gives himself up to the pursuit of an Idea, chimerical or practical, but large enough to be to him a religion. He lives no idle life; he does not rise with the slug-gard, or lull his brain with opiates; he sees a beckoning spirit on the high hills, and hears a voice bidding him make haste whilst the light lasts; he writhes under many an inexplicable inspiration; he dares the flood that affrights the coward; he cannot spare himself: he is not his own. Such men are not to be despised. They give life a higher meaning, and service a bolder range. I only say of them in this connection that their worship is neither easy nor inexpensive. There is a popular delusion to the effect that give up the Bible and give up the church, life would become easy, pleasant, divesting itself of every spiritual trouble, enjoying the passing feast, and allowing to-morrow to come as it may and to bring with it its own care for its own duties. This is indeed a popular delusion. Examine the expenses-book of the mere pleasure-seeker; see what he has laid out for travelling, for objects which appeal to the eye, for the satisfaction of his lowest desires, for the gratification of perverted taste; add up the pages one by one, and totalise them at the last, and see whether the sensualist has lived an inexpensive life. On the other hand, there are men of a very different caste, who, having renounced what is known as orthodox religion and all its institutions, have yet found that success of the most honourable and legitimate kind is associated with daily crosses and self-denial. Whosoever would follow Jesus Christ must take up his Cross. That is often thought to be an expression limited exclusively to the Christian religion. We find, however, that it is nothing of the kind. Take out the word "Christ," and put in its place any other object worthy in some degree of human pursuit, and it will be found that the cross must be taken up in following that object with constancy and devotion. Men have to rise early, to run



great risks, to deny themselves many temporary gratifications, to say No where often they would be glad to say Yes; they have to abandon the society of wife and children and the security and joy of home that they may go afar to learn new languages, face new conditions, and endeavour to subdue oppositions of the most stubborn kind. Why all this devotion to a purpose? why this determined resolution to succeed? Surely the object must account for all the expenditure which is lavished upon it. But the point now to be noted is that whoever would secure great results must undergo great self-denials. The highest application of this doctrine is found in the religion of Jesus Christ. Whoever would gain immortality must hate his present life,—whoever would seize heaven in its highest interpretations and uses must hold in contempt, as to mere permanence of satisfaction, this little earth and its vain appeals.

The service of the true God includes all the grandest ideas of the human mind. This is the supreme advantage which Christianity has over every phase of human thought. It keeps men back from no service that is good: on the contrary, it compels them to adopt and pursue it. It is but just to deny that the men who ignore or neglect the God of the Bible are doing the great work of the world. Everything that is good is included in the programme of Christianity. Is the question one of international peace? The whole spirit of the Bible moves in this direction, and compels its believers to denounce war, to hold back the sword until the last possible moment, and to take such views of human nature as will develop its best aspects. Christianity shows all that is good in human life,—not only good as a matter of fact, but good as to probability; and believing that even the most warlike men may be subdued in many instances by argument, persuasion, and highmindedness on the part of opponents, Christianity insists that the sword shall not be unsheathed so long as one word remains to be spoken in the interests of righteous peace. Is it a question of high ideals? Then we may boldly ask what ideal can be higher, and morally completer, than that which is presented by the religion of Jesus Christ? That ideal may be expressed as peace on earth, and goodwill toward men,—an idea involving personal righteousness, international honour,

the recognition of the broadest human rights, and the possibility of all nations, peoples, kindreds, and tongues being consolidated into one Christian brotherhood, not as to mere accidents, but as to supremacy of purpose and pureness of motive. The followers of Bible godliness are not mere dreamers. They do more for the world's progress than any other men in society can do. We are willing that they should be judged by any standard which even their opponents may erect: in the teaching of the young, in the support of the poor, in the devotion of time, in the donation of money, in the suffering of personal inconvenience—a position of unapproachable supremacy may be claimed for them. And in proportion to their godliness are they unconscious of their sacrifices. The Cross of Christ is not a pillar on which men carve the memory of their good deeds; on that sacred tree are no incisions made by boastful hands; the service is rendered because of love, and it seeks no immortality of itself other than the witness of lives redeemed and blessed.

The faith and service of the true God should express themselves in the character of believers. Every man represents his god. It would be easy to find your god by analysing your character. It would surely be enough to describe some men in order to have their god instantly named by those who have listened to the description. Take an instance: here is a man whose eyes are aflame with hot blood; his cheeks are swollen and pimpled; his lips are purple; his hands are unsteady, his voice is husky; he drinks wine in the morning, and tarries long at the drink; he is known in every house of pleasure and self-indulgence; his appetite grows by what it feeds on. Now name the god at whose altar that man worships! We cannot hesitate for a moment to write upon that altar the word Sensuality. Take another instance: here is a person whose one study is personal dress; the most anxious looks of inquiry are addressed to the mirror; the question always turns upon the fashion of the passing hour; there can be no rest whilst a colour is wrong, or a ribbon is wanting, or some readjustment is needed to bring the clothing into harmony with the established custom of the day; the papers perused are those which relate to dress, decoration, ornamentation of every kind; the news brought from every

assembly relates to dress, carriage, manner, complexion. Who can hesitate to name the god worshipped in such an instance as this? Even the least instructed as to the words of men would not hesitate to describe persons so interested in such questions as the worshippers or the victims of Vanity. The Christian ought to be able to stand the same examination. Where we cannot understand his theology, we may at least inquire into his character; and where the character is pure, high, noble, it would be impossible to deny a high religious motive and a noble religious consecration; at all events, the mention of such motive and consecration would be in strict harmony with the character, and by so much would be presumably true. The advantage which the Christian worshipper has over all the heathen round about him is in the fact that he himself was converted from social heathenism and from trust in false gods. "Ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led." Although this has literally no application to us, its spiritual reference is abundantly clear: we have followed the customs of the world; we have drunk at its fountains; we have wandered in its gardens; we have bought its delights; we have sacrificed at its altars; and to-day we stand up to testify that the gods of the heathen can neither hear prayer nor answer it, can neither pity human distress nor relieve it. We know also with equal certainty, on the other hand, that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ covers our whole life, answers all its deepest necessities, is a sovereign balm for every wound, and cordial for our fears. As for the gods of the heathen, they that make them are like unto them, so is every one that trusteth in them; and whilst the Christian apologist delights in this method of inquiry, he ought to be ready to submit himself to it, and in the degree of his readiness for such submission will occur to him the idea of solemn and vast responsibility. Let us continually exclaim under circumstances which excite the world's amazement at our fortitude and hope, "The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot;" "My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever." Such testimony will in due time become an argument,

## Chapter x. 7-24.

### JEREMIAH'S STUDY OF PROVIDENCE.

"Who would not fear thee, O King of nations?" (ver. 7).

THE prophet is now in the midst of a review of the whole situation of which he himself constituted a living part; he is looking round and making notes; we have the advantage of reading his journal. It is an advantage to read what a man of such large mental capacity had to say respecting the religion and politics and the general civilisation of his day. We are accustomed to speak of the tears of Jeremiah; sometimes his tears were sparks of fire. He did more than weep. There was no sharper critic of the day. Few men could take in more horizon than Jeremiah when he fairly looked things in the face. It may be profitable to follow him, therefore, in his review, to see where human nature was long ago, and to compare its ancient condition with its immediate circumstances and purposes. The prophets were always wrathful when they came in presence of idols—clay, wooden, metallic gods. They then writhed with spendid scorn; their satire was inspired; the gods withered away before their intelligent and holy sarcasm. They spat upon the gods, lifted them up, set them down, walked around them, defied them; but never for the sake of doing so; always for the purpose of bringing in a clear revelation of the true God. Here is the function of satire. We are not called upon merely to mock one another. It was not enough for the prophet that he should mock the worshippers of Baal: he must reveal the true God. All mockery, all sarcasm, all jibing and sneering at other men's religion, how much soever they may be mistaken, should lead up to positive instruction, direct revelation, a very vision of heaven and God. So it is in the great prophets of the Old Testament. They scorned magnificently, or they revealed lucidly and tenderly, and exhorted with poignant and experimental eloquence.

This chapter opens with a desperate attack upon the customs of the people—that is to say, upon the religious ceremonies and rites of the nation ; and then the prophet exclaims, “ Who would not fear thee, O King of nations ? ” Even suppose this were a poetical image, it is full of the finest suggestiveness. The image is that of a man who has been going up and down the idol temples to see if he could find a god, and having failed to find what lay upon his heart with all the tenderness of kinship and appealed to his intelligence with all the vigour of omniscience, he lifted up his eyes and said, There must be something better than all this. He must needs in his imagining make a King of nations, rather than be without one. This makes plain a good deal of the theology of the ages. Men did not create it merely for the sake of showing mechanical or literary cleverness, but for the sake of expressing the only possible satisfaction to certain moral and spiritual instincts and deep religious necessities. We, therefore, should respect all honest broad-minded theologians. They were pioneers in the higher civilisation ; they began to build and were not able to finish : but every age is not called to build a separate temple ; enough if one age builds partly, then ceases, making room for another generation ; all the while the living temple, often invisible and mystic, is rising solidly and eternally to the skies. We may, therefore, not mock our forerunners even in theology. We have profited by their mistakes : if they blundered they suffered part of the penalty, and if we have seized the advantages they secured we should forget a good many of the mistakes into which they fell. They prayed bravely ; by the very tone of their prayers they surpassed many of their theological conceptions. They were always ahead of their intelligence by the fervour of their moral nature. That is the true test of orthodoxy. As to what we may think, what does the universe care ? We do not know what we thought six months ago ; we cannot tell what we may think six months hence : but this we know, that love never changes but by increase, that devotion is never in any other attitude than on its knees, that the soul lives by homage, and disciplines itself by obedience. Along that line, radiant yet stern, we make our best progress. As for opinions, we ventilate them, we exchange them, we modify them ; and by this very transition from opinion to opinion we purify our

thinking and gain a little, it may be a very little, in an upward intellectual ascent.

A bold title is this to give to the living God—namely, “King of nations.” There should be no other king but God. All kings are mistakes. Israel never wanted a king until Israel forgot to pray. The king was granted, for God does answer some imperfect and almost vicious prayers. He has no other way of teaching us. To give us a little of our own way is to make us feel quite a change of climate; is to bring us back again to loyalty and homage. As education advances kings will go down; the Son of man will come, the glorious Humanity. Meanwhile, even kings may serve great purposes, but only so far as they are great men. Every man now stands on good behaviour. The inefficient man, though he may be amiable, must go. We are taught that lesson first in commerce. Heads of firms do not increase the salary of amiability, but of efficiency. They never say that an employé is so amiable, and obliging, and civil, and modest, and unobtrusive, that they will double his income. What, then, is honoured? Intelligence, energy, capacity; the man who can do the work, and yet sustain the character; that man shall stand before kings, and sometimes get beyond them. There are kings the world would not willingly part with, monarchs that could ill be spared, so wise, so beneficent, so gracious, so altogether comely that the world says they must live on: would they could live for ever! What riots they spare, what difficulties they prevent, of what healing are they the conscious or unconscious ministers! And what is true of kings is only true of them because it is true of all men. Even preachers must go down if they cannot preach. That is very hard! Surely an exception ought to be made of them; but the public will make no exception; and the public therein affirms a right principle. Kings are only good, and all men are only to be tolerated and to be honoured, in proportion as they are higher than their office, better and more than their function—in proportion as they live capably for the good of others. Nothing is to be hurried in any direction. We gain rather by growth than by violence. He puts his watch right instantly who puts it right by the hands; but he is much mistaken if he thinks the whole process is over and done by that



manipulation. There is an interior work to be done. So with all civilisation, and all its functions and offices. We do nothing by merely smiting, striking ; but we do everything by concession, by conciliation, by generous trust, by large education, by magnanimous hopefulness of one another. Sometimes we do everything by doing nothing. There is a time to stand still as to all outward demonstrativeness ; but whilst standing still in that sense we may be advancing very steadily and surely, though without noise or ostentation. The ages move towards brotherhood, towards the kingliness of humanity ; yea the ages move towards the supersession of all mere office. The time will come when the preacher and teacher will not be needed ; no man shall say to his brother, Know the Lord : for every man shall know him, from the least even unto the greatest. Then will come the time of worship, of adoration, of singing, of that broader service of sympathy that is now almost impossible to forecast and to express in words.

The prophet acquires the greater confidence in God in proportion as he sees the utter weakness and worthlessness of all the gods which men have made. Thus by experience men are brought to the true religion. Let men shed their gods, as they shed some infantile disease. Do not hurry them in this matter. Let them really have time to know how little their gods are. If you make too much haste in detaching men from their idols, they may have a lingering suspicion that if they had tarried longer they would have been better satisfied. Let them have large experience ; let them know exactly what their man-made or hand-made gods can do, in winter, in night, in affliction, in the churchyard ; and when they have tested them so thoroughly as to take them into their hands and dash them to the ground as worthless and intrusive, they are one step nearer the true altar.

The prophet, having seen what the gods could do, turned with a new cry and with a profounder adoration to the King of kings, the King of nations. A beautiful expression is that,—“King of nations,” an expression which takes up the whole nation as if it were a unit, as if it were one line, and that blesses the national life. There is an ideality in that conception which is worthy of the finest imagination. Why should there not be a national unit

as well as an individual unit? We speak of the national debt, the national health, the national character, the national standing; therein we recognise the unity of the nation, the singularity and solidarity of the whole people: there is no man that liveth unto himself; we are not isolations, but parts of a great commonwealth. So when we pray for one another we should pray also for the whole nation. Then we extend the idea until we see what is known as a concert of nations, an international amity or comity; then beyond that conception we have a still larger one—namely, the conception of the unity of the whole earth. Our geography should never make us enemies. Friendship should never end at a red line or a blue definition of territory: these lines and boundaries are useful and convenient, and within certain limits are indispensable for present purposes, so that there may be no confusion amongst the peoples, but they should be so laid down as never to interfere with the full vision which nation should have of nation, and the full recognition which one country should have of the excellences of another. Christianity alone can take the sting out of geography, and make the whole human family one in sympathy and trust and love. If ever Christianity has appeared to do the contrary, it was by travesty and blasphemy, not by fair honest enlightened interpretation of principle and duty.

Jeremiah turns once more to the worthless gods, and from verses 11-15 he shows the relation of the false to the true, and the true to the false:—

“Thus shall ye say unto them, The gods that have not made the heavens and the earth, even they shall perish from the earth, and from under these heavens. He hath made the earth by his power, he hath established the world by his wisdom, and hath stretched out the heavens by his discretion. When he uttereth his voice, there is a multitude of waters in the heavens, and he causeth the vapours to ascend from the ends of the earth; he maketh lightnings with rain, and bringeth forth the wind out of his treasures. Every man is brutish in his knowledge: every founder is confounded by the graven image: for his molten image is falsehood, and there is no breath in them. They are vanity, and the work of errors: in the time of their visitation they shall perish.”

“Man is brutish in his knowledge”—that is to say, when left to himself he goes very little beyond the line of instinct, animal impulse, and convenience; very clever in his inventions, but

never able to touch the heavens ; all he does is based upon the earth, and does not rise to the blue sky, but by some wind or hand invisible his tower is thrown down in the night-time. The prophet could have been corrected upon all these matters had correction been possible. The prophets of Israel, like the ministers of to-day, did not speak about things that did not admit of immediate criticism and revision. Whoever speaks openly, publicly, broadly, subjects himself to criticism and to reply, and in the end a true judgment is formed of his ministry to the nation. We can always correct our statements by our experience. If a man say that life is brief, who shall contradict him ? Not the oldest man, for even the oldest man would say, "Few and evil have been the days of thy servant." To speak, therefore, of the brevity of life is to speak experimentally, and instantly to secure the confirmation of the intelligent world. If any teacher should say, Life is full of trouble, life is a varied woe, life has daily burdens and daily difficulty ; it is a stress, a conflict, a sharp contention ; it is full of stings, and its cups of gold are filled with potions of bitterness,—who would contradict the teacher ? Not one. We should remind ourselves of the light that is in life, and of the occasional joy that sings to us in the night-time, and of the intermittent draughts of sweetness which we are permitted to enjoy ; but, after all, the music of life would fall into the minor key, and we should hear much of trouble and pain and darkness and loss, and amid all the music there would be an under-sigh, an almost groan, never to be expressed in definite and quotable words.

This being the case, is man to turn to himself ? Ashamed of the gods, is man to take up with the idea of self-idolatry or self-instruction ? The prophet replies to that inquiry :—

"O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (ver. 23).

This is a very apt interposition, for whilst the prophet was denouncing the hand-made gods, who did not think of turning to himself as a refuge and a defence ? It was well, therefore, to say something about man himself. What can man do when thrown upon his own resources, when he is called upon to tackle the great problems and the solemn questions of life and destiny ?

Jeremiah ventured an opinion upon this. Is it a true one?—"O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps." Now, that is either true, or it is not true; and we ought to be in a position to say whether it is the one or the other. It is most true; for we have tried to direct our way, and we have failed, we have made more mistakes than we have ever confessed; sometimes with a modesty that is difficult to distinguish from self-conceit, we have owned that we have fallen into occasional error; but who has ever taken out the tablet of his heart, held it up within reading distance, that others might peruse the record of miscarriage, misadventure, and mistake? On the other hand, how many are there who would hesitate to stand forth and say, In proportion to trustfulness, docility, obedience, has real prosperity come? How many are there who would confess that they had been stronger after prayer than they were before it, readier to deal with rough life after they have had long communion with God? These are experimental matters; we do not call fancy to our aid in these discussions. Here is the hold which Christ has upon us. We are called upon to say what we were before we saw him, what we were after he wrought the mystery of grace within us; and the change is so complete and definite and absolute that there can be no mistaking it: it is the change from death to life. Who ever mistook summer for winter? Who is there that knows not the eloquence of the sun, the persuasiveness of light, the allurements of all heaven's singing ministry? On experience we stand. Experience is our argument. If Christianity were a question of grammar against grammar, interpretation against interpretation, who could maintain that he alone was right? The moment we leave our conflicting interpretations and come into a common experience, we feel that, explain it as we may, there is now a daily inspiration of the individual life. Sometimes we are surprised by its action, and we exclaim, That was an inspiration! How did we come to do so? Our purpose lay in another direction, but suddenly we changed the whole plan, pursued another policy, and on the road we have met angels, and opening heavens, and welcoming hospitalities. If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and begrudgeth not, upbraideth not. Christians should be more definite in their

statements upon these matters. They should not hesitate to use such words as "inspired by God," "guided by Heaven," directed by the loving Father of creation. Were we more frank, definite, and fearless about these matters, we should make a deeper impression upon the age in which we live.

The prophet recognises the need of another ministry which for the present is never joyous, but grievous :—

"O Lord, correct me, but with judgment; not in thine anger, lest thou bring me to nothing" (ver. 24).

He would have judgment with measure ; he would have chastisement apportioned to him, not indiscriminately inflicted upon him. Indiscriminateness of justice often becomes injustice. Penalty becomes instructive and even hopeful in proportion to its being critically measured, so that there should not be one stroke too many. It is well to have an odd number of stripes, for they need the more careful counting. The law says, "forty stripes, save one." It is not, Shall be smitten, scourged, leaving the number of strokes to the smiter ; the law was made before it was broken, and the law was made before the penalty was thought of. Before the offender had committed trespass, punishment was meted out to the offence. Here we have philosophy, forethought, the economy of strength, the wise outlay of ministerial and penal activity. But who prays to be corrected ? Who prays to be judged ? We should get great advantage if we could begin at that point. If we could ask for the penalty, we should take out of it a good deal of its sting. It is resistance to penalty that makes the punishment the heavier. If we could invite the stroke, we must kiss the hand that deals it. We should say, We deserve thy wrath ; if we do not suffer from its smart, we should lose much instruction, yea, and much spiritual strength,—Lord, we have come this day to be smitten ; we have not come with outstretched hands to seize heavenly treasures, but we have come with bowed heads that thy lash may be laid upon our back. Correction that is prayed for becomes a means of grace ; it is received in the right spirit because asked for in the right spirit ; but to accept it dumbly, sullenly, or in the spirit of fatefulness, is to lose the advantage of chastisement. He holds all things wisely and profitably who holds them loosely—that is, who

holds them only at God's bidding. The man who says, "I am but a tenant-at-will," holds his house, his body, on the right conditions. He says: "I may be dismissed to-morrow, I cannot tell, I am not the freeholder; I am but a tenant-at-will; I am ready to go, because the universe is so governed that an obedient soul is never called away from a house until he is called to some larger habitation; but to leave this poor little house I am perfectly willing, I shall be clothed upon with the house from heaven; you should congratulate me when I tell you that the Lord Jesus hath showed me that I must shortly put off this tabernacle; we should have a feast to-night, yea a banquet, and music, and singing all round, for to-morrow I am to be liberated." But we are, meanwhile, the victims of the body; we are the prisoners of time; we are scourged by the very limitations we sometimes scorn. It is a strange life, it is a tragic comedy; we laugh and cry in the same breath; we worship and blaspheme within the same hour. Yet all the while, as we have just seen, there is what is called the law of tendency, and amid all the laughter and crying, praying and blaspheming, the shout of triumph and the groan of defeat, there is steady progress. Men cannot see it. We cannot see it ourselves. But we are made conscious of it now and again, and in those moments of high consciousness we claim to have been under the inspiration of God, and to be in very deed his children, in the sense of having been created by his power, redeemed by his grace, and directed by his Spirit.



### Chapter xiii. 14.

“And I will dash them one against another, even the fathers and the sons together, saith the Lord: I will not pity, nor spare, nor have mercy, but destroy them.”

#### DIVINE PUNISHMENTS.

THESE words should be spoken with tears. It is a great mistake in doctrine as well as in practice to imagine that the imprecations of Holy Scripture should be spoken loudly, and, as it were, ruthlessly. They are words that should choke the speaker with emotion; they should be wet with the dew of pity. When Jesus came near the city he wept over it. He was never so eloquent in speech as in feeling. He said he would have gathered the city together: he meant to do so: he loved it, he yearned over it; it would have been a kind of heaven to him; he would have made it the home of the world: but it rejected him; it said No to his tenderest appeal, and it thrust its hand into his very life. The words before us would seem to require the thunder for their utterance; but they do not. They were not spoken willingly, but the speaker was bound to utter them. They are the security of creation; they have in them the bonds which bind heaven together in eternal unity and safety. This power of destruction goes commensurately with the power of creation. Let us in this spirit study the words.

Divine punishments are possible. If we are not destroyed, it is not for want of power on the part of the offended Creator. The universe is very sensitively put together in this matter; everywhere there are lying resources which under one touch or breath would spring up and avenge an outraged law. The weapons lie very handy; we are walking upon a thin crust: it may give way, and none can save us or put the surface through which we have plunged together again. Now and then God does

bring us to see how near death is to every life. For a long while we pass on as if the earth were a solid rock, the heaven an infinite solidity that could not move; and we forget that every breath we draw is a struggle with death, every throb of the heart a narrow escape from destruction. Life is critical. It may be blown away, stopped suddenly, rebuked, and die as it were in a cloud of wrath. It is a wonderful life, with great powers of endurance, great capacities; and yet it is not stopped slowly because of its greatness: it may be cut in twain in the twinkling of an eye; the greatest life and pulse could be stopped in a moment. The air waits but a word from God to suffocate the race; the obedient earth, swinging like a censer around the altar, needs but a hint from heaven, and it will drop infinite fathoms into space, and be lost for ever. Understand, therefore, that we are not living this kind of riotous life simply because God cannot punish us. We do not escape the rod because there is no rod. It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed. Think of that. Do let it enter into our minds and make us sober, sedate—if not religious and contrite. How soon we are frightened! Whilst things go on regularly in their monotonous course, we take no heed of them; but sometimes a meteor of unusual size is seen to fall, and then we feel how powerless we are: the lightning strikes the forest and writes in scorching heat some dread signature upon the wood, and we run away as if we would try to be religious: an epidemic vexes the wind, enters into every open door, searches the apertures in the casements, and then we ask for the Bible and begin to count our sins, as if to count were to repent and to destroy. Let us remember that we are walking, as it were, through an armoury filled with weapons which are only waiting the divine hand, and every one of which, or any one of which, would bring our life to a painful close.

Divine punishments are humiliating. In the thirteenth verse the Lord says that he will make the people, as it were, drunk:—

“I will fill all the inhabitants of this land, even the kings that sit upon David's throne, and the priests, and the prophets, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, with drunkenness.”

It is a humiliating punishment. Some punishments have a kind of dignity about them: sometimes a man dies almost heroically,

and turns death itself into a kind of victory; and we cannot but consent that the time is well chosen, and the method the best for giving to the man's reputation completeness, and to his influence stability and progress. God can bring us to our latter end, as it were, nobly: we may die like princes; death may be turned into a kind of coronation; our death-bed may be the picture of our life—the most consummately beautiful and exquisite revelation of character—or the Lord can drive us down like mad beasts to an unconsecrated grave. Close your eyes, let the vision of your imagination have full play, and you may see the Lord driving whole cities down to ruin without one ray of lurid glory to mitigate the horror and the gloom of the overthrow. God will make the inhabitants of cities sinning against him as if they were drunken men, and then he will make them kill one another; they will be dashed together, head against head, by invisible hands, and none will be able to explain the tumult. How contemptuous he can be! How bitter, how intolerable the sarcasm of God! “I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh.” The Lord seems now and again to take a kind of delight in showing how utterly our pride can be stained and broken up and trampled underfoot. He will send a worm to eat up the harvest: would he but send an angel with a gleaming sickle to cut it down we might see somewhat of glory in the disaster; but he will make a little worm, and say to it, Go and eat up their fields. If an army of men were to invade our vineyards, we might watch the gates and repel the foe; but the Lord sends a little black beetle upon the vine, and says, Wither it; and no fingers are dainty enough or industrious enough to overtake the plague and stay the ruin. Thus God comes into our life along a line that may be designated as a line of contempt and humiliation. We rise in the morning as if it were still night; we put our hand to our head as if to find the brain which we have consciously lost; we attempt to pronounce the name of dearest friend or youngest child, and it is gone from us as if we had never heard it; we look for our crops in the great broad acres lying a thousand thick together, and, behold, the locust has devoured every green thing; the roots have been eaten by unbidden guests, and no blessing was pronounced upon the horrible repast. To what ends we may come! The strong

mind may be bowed down in weakness which a child will pity ; the gifted man may lose all his talents in a moment ; and he who led the sentiments of nations may have to ask to be conducted across one of the thoroughfares of his own city,—power gone, ability withered, self-reliance dissolved like a vapour in the wind. O that men were wise, that they would hold themselves as God's and not their own, as divine property rather than personal possession ! then would they walk soberly and recruit themselves in many a prayer, and bring back their youth because they trust in God.

Divine punishments are not only possible and humiliating, but when they do come they are complete—"I will destroy them." We cannot tell the meaning of this word ; we do not know what is meant by "destruction" ; we have our own ideas of it, we use the term as if we knew its meaning,—and possibly we do know its meaning according to the breadth of our own intention and purpose ; but the word as used by God has divine meanings upon which we can lay no measuring line. We cannot destroy anything : we can destroy its form, its immediate relation, its temporary value ; but the thing itself in its substance or in its essence we can never destroy. No atom of sand has been lost from the basket of the universe ; no drop of dew has escaped from the account of God. The scales of the sanctuary are silver, and in them are weighed all worlds and lives, all spaces and substances : forms change, correlation takes place, transmutation, rapid development of power, and change of relationship ; but the things themselves are still there, and God needs light no candle nor sweep the house diligently until he find it. Things are lost to us, but they are present to the hand of God. When the Lord says he will take up this matter of destruction we cannot tell what he means ; we dare not think of it. We use the word "nothing," but cannot tell what he means by the nothingness of nothing, by the negativeness of negation, by the sevenfold darkness, by the heaped-up midnight of gloom. My soul, come not thou into that secret !

Divine punishments are avoidable.

"Give glory to the Lord your God, before he cause darkness" (ver. 16).

The door of hope is set open, even in this midnight of threatening ;

still we are on praying ground and on pleading terms with God; even now we can escape the bolt that gleams in the thundercloud. What say you, men, brethren, and fathers? Why be hard? why attempt the impossible? why think we can run away from God? and why, remembering that our days are but a handful, will we not be wise and act as souls that have been instructed? If we had a thousand years guaranteed to us with which to fight, compete, contend, there might be some excuse for spending a few of them in ways that please the vain imagination; but the grave is actually in our house, our bed is but one form of our tomb, sleep nightly preaches of the close of life, and every inquiry that is addressed to us in the whole course of business has in it, if we could understand it aright, a hint of the final and complete judgment. Would God we could be wise and spend all the seven days of the week to God's glory and in God's praise! But it seems as if life must be a struggle to the last, and as if should any man ever reach heaven he will do it by a hair's breadth; he will go into heaven as one who has narrowly escaped perdition. Life is critical; life is terrible; life is almost divine.

The pity of the Lord is thus magnified because all these resources lie within the reach of his hand. He will not touch them if he can possibly help it. The hatefulness of sin is thus shown; nothing that is not infinitely hateful could extort from God the word destroy as applied to the formations of his own hand. The clemency of God is thus declared—"Give glory to the Lord your God, before he cause darkness." He may yet be appeased: the Cross is not yet taken down; the Cross means opportunity to return—a basis of righteousness upon which to settle the reconciliation of the human with the divine, and the divine with the human. The meaning of the blood of Jesus Christ is, that what we cannot do for ourselves God has done for us; and what we are asked to do is to throw ourselves in an exercise of loving faith upon mysteries we cannot understand, upon grace that astounds the imagination and turns our boldest speech into silence.

## Chapters xiii.-xiv.

### JEREMIAH'S QUESTIONS.

THE Book of Jeremiah is full of questions.\* They are questions indicative of bewilderment, amazement, ignorance, hopefulness; they stand often in place of that silence which is more eloquent than speech, as if the prophet would tempt the Lord himself into reply by asking questions. Thus we tempt little children, and thus we would tempt the wisest scholars with whom we come into momentary contact, and thus adoringly would we seek to lure God into audible speech.

"Where is the flock that was given thee, thy beautiful flock?" (xiii. 20).

Let this stand as an inquiry from God himself. The prophet often personates God: sometimes it is almost impossible to tell who is speaking, whether it is God, or whether it is the prophet speaking in the divine name; but we can always tell by its quality and by its music whence the question comes. "What wilt thou say when he shall punish thee?" Here is a flock that is being inquired about, not a flock only, but a beautiful flock. The question comes into our family life, and asks us where all the children are, those lovely children, that banished the silence of the house and made it ring with music. They were fair, they were charming, they were affectionate; what a sweet, merry little fellowship they made!—where are they? The parent ought to be able to give some answer to that inquiry. Have they been spoiled into evil, flattered into self-idolatry, neglected into atheism? Have they been over-instructed, over-disciplined, wholly overborne, so that the will has not been only broken but shattered? Where are they? Are children likely to grow up of themselves? Flowers do not, fruits do not, horses do not.

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\* See *ante*, p. 313.



There is more man in a horse than there is horse. Will children turn out to be saints and psalmists and preachers by your enjoying yourselves and letting them go their own way? Nature does not submit to that philosophy of life; she says: "You must watch me—mother Nature; you must be up in the morning almost as early as I am, and you must begin your training whilst the dew is upon me, or I will uproot your flowers and set a weed where every one of them grew." Oh, the cruelty of kindness! the madness of neglect! A good example should be supported by good instruction. He is no shepherd, but a tyrant, who does not co-operate with his children, lure them, fascinate them, and give them sacred instruction without appearing to do so, and who when offering religious privileges offers them as if offering coronation, yea, and all heaven.

The question enters also into our Church life, saying to every pastor, "Where is the flock that was given thee, thy beautiful flock?"—not large, perhaps, but so expectant, so sympathetic, so co-operative. It is possible for preachers to be always in their places, and yet always out of them. What the flock wants is pastoral preaching. The difficulty is to overcome the temptation to preach to somebody who is not there. There is another difficulty almost impossible to escape, and that is to preach to the one man rather than to all souls—the one man being the critic, the intolerable man, who does not understand human nature, who is cursed with a competence, and cursed by knowing so many books—as to their title-pages. The preacher will be ruined by that man, unless that man is ruined by the preacher; a great controversy, though not always patent to the public eye, must take place, and the preacher must oust the critic. The people must have pastoral prayer, prayer often all tears, always trembling with sympathy, always indicative of the open eye that sees human life in its most tragic features and relations. The preacher must always know himself to be set for the healing and nurture of men. In every congregation there are the broken-hearted, those who are shattered in fortune, feeble in health, spiritually-minded; women who have great home cares; souls that cannot thrive on criticism; lives that need all nourishment and comfort and loving sympathy. The pastor who so recognises

his duty and conducts his function will be able to tell where the flock is, the beautiful flock, the sheep and the lambs; he will carry the lambs in his bosom. Preaching of that sort will never need any foolish assistance in gathering together a flock. Men soon know the physicians who can heal broken hearts. It is marvellous how the poor and the weary and the sad come to know that somewhere there is a man who has the divine touch, the shepherd's voice, the pastoral enthusiasm. Let it be known by father, mother, preacher, king, queen, that the time will come when the question will be asked, "Where is the flock, the beautiful flock?" Nor will it be sufficient to return a vague and multitudinous reply. The Lord knows every one of his flock. You cannot offer him thirty-nine instead of forty; you cannot persuade him to look upon the flock as a whole, a moving crowd; he counts while he looks, he numbers all his flock, and each passes under the rod. We must be careful for the individual. There is an abundance of public benevolence; a wonderful desire to preside at public meetings, and a shameful disregard of the one little crushed life, the one half-sobbed intercession, which asks for pity, which begs for bread.

Question follows question in this prophet: "And if thou say in thine heart, Wherefore come these things upon me?" (xiii. 22), thou wilt assume the rôle of the hypocrite, thou wilt talk for talking' sake; for thou knowest right well that God's judgments come upon human sin. The Lord never punishes for the sake of punishing. It is not to test the quality of his rod, but to develop the character of man, that God smites any living creature. When he drowned the world, he first drowned his own heart in tears. He suffered more than you suffered when he took the one little ewe lamb away from you because you were turning it into an idol or a temptation. In all our affliction he is afflicted.

"Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?" (xiii. 23). There is no pathos in that inquiry. Perhaps there is a little cadence of satire; there may be some hint of mockery. It is a moral inquiry, ending in this conclusion—"Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil." Man cannot do a little of each, and do both with indifference or reluctance, and have

the good set down to him as a positive virtue. Habit becomes second nature, according to the assurance of the proverb. There is a use in evil; it is easy to get into the skill of evil-doing; verily we seem to the manner born; it is easier to do wrong than to do right. That, however, is but a partial view, because when proper discipline has been undergone it becomes impossible to do evil. How is it that men do go astray? Why is not one child born that stands up and says, "I will never budge, I will be inflexible in virtue, heroic in suffering, valiant in testimony: I will be the man the ages have been sighing and groaning for." Where is that child? If we speak of original sin we are mocked. We dare scarcely mention the name of Adam, though—mystery of mysteries—we have a doctrine of heredity. This doctrine as now understood seems to go no farther back than the grandfather. That is a poor heredity, and laying tremendous responsibility upon that venerable gentleman. What has he done to be the fountain and origin of heredity? he never heard the word; he would need to have it explained to him if he returned to these earthly schools. If we once acknowledge the doctrine of heredity, then there is no Adam, though he were born millions of ages ago, who can escape the responsibility of being the first. We do nothing with this doctrine but aggravate the responsibilities of our own immediate ancestors. The larger doctrine takes in all humanity. There I will stand by the doctrine of heredity. It is a historical fact; it is a philosophy; it is a science by itself; it deserves the devoutest, calmest study: but the doctrine of heredity must not be terminated at a certain point, it must cover the whole ground, otherwise it is partial, whimsical, fanciful, and misleading. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin?" That question ought to be answerable. "Or the leopard his spots?" There ought to be no difficulty about that inquiry. The prophet means by these interrogations that sooner shall these miracles be wrought than that habitual evil shall turn to the ways of light and wisdom and pureness. Then, is it impossible? With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. That is the open door. We must be born again. It is easy to sneer at the doctrine, to call it ancient, and to regard it as metaphysical; but it does take place in every advancing life, and sometimes when we even disown the name

we accept the process. We are not to be limited by human definitions. We do not go to some great theologian to tell us the meaning of regeneration; we go into our own experience, and through that we read the divine word, and by the reciprocal action of the divine word and the human consciousness we begin to see what is meant by the Ethiopian changing his skin and the leopard his spots, what is meant by rejuvenation, the offcasting of the old man, and the blooming of the new life, the regenerated soul. This cannot be explained in words, it can be felt in the heart.

“Wilt thou not be made clean? when shall it once be?” (xiii. 27).

This question appropriately follows the foregoing. It would seem as if the prophet were speaking the language of despair; but a little rearrangement of the translation will show that the prophet is really not giving up all hope: Woe unto thee, O Jerusalem; wilt thou not be made clean? Shall there not at the very end be a vital change in thee? When the day is drawing to a close shalt thou not feel the power of the Holy One, and respond to it? Shalt thou not be born as a child at eventide? So the spirit of the Bible is a spirit of hopefulness. It will not lose any man so long as it can keep hold of him. It is a motherlike book, it is a most shepherdly book, it will not let men die if they can be kept alive. Here is the gospel appeal: “Wilt thou not be made clean?” Here is no urging upon Jerusalem to clean herself, to work out her own regeneration, to throw off her own skin, and to cleanse her own characteristic spots and taints and stains. These words convey an offer, point to a process, preach a gospel. Hear the answer from the leper: “Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.” Let the words thus be brought into conjunction, the question and the prayer. No leper can make himself clean; though he bathe in Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus know nothing of leprosy-healing. There is a river the streams whereof receive all our diseases, and still the river flows like crystal from the throne of God. We know what the great kind sea is. It receives all the nations, gives all the empires a tonic, and yet rolls round the world an untainted blessing. The question addressed to each heart is, “Wilt thou not be made clean? when shall it once

be?" Shall it not be at once? Shall it not be at the very end? Shall not the angels have yet to report even concerning the worst, last of men, the festers of moral creation, "Behold, he prayeth!" The intelligence would vibrate throughout heaven, and give a new joy to eternity. Never give up any man. When he dies I know not what may be done, I cannot follow him. What may await him on the other side; some poets have foretold, some loving hearts have forecast; all I surely know is that the gospel is given in charge to us to be delivered within the bounds of time, and that every preacher is charged to say to inquiring, and even to indifferent sinners, "Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

"O the Hope of Israel, the Saviour thereof in time of trouble, why shouldest thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night?" (xiv. 8).

Here we reach a deeper pathos. The prophet is conscious of the absence of God. A great change has taken place in the divine relation to Jeremiah and to the world. He who once came to reside, to abide, now called in like a wayfaring man, and passed on. What does the pilgrim care for the politics of the city? He came but yesternight, to-morrow he will be gone; he cannot entangle himself with the politics, or the social life, or the family life of the city; he says, I can tarry but a night, I may not unsandal my feet, and my staff I had better have in my hand whilst I sleep a little; I must be up with the dawn. Why art thou as a pilgrim, a wayfaring man, one who can turn aside but to tarry for a night? Almighty One, gracious One, thou didst live with us once; thou wert as part of us, our very home life depended upon thee, we breathed the atmosphere of thy fellowship, and now we hardly ever see thee; thou dost come sandalled, thou dost come with the staff in thine hand, thou dost scarcely ask a question, or express a sympathy, or disclose a solicitude; thou art no sooner here than gone. O the Hope of Israel, the Saviour thereof in time of trouble, our hearts ache when we think of thee coming as a stranger—thou once a friend!

"Hast thou utterly rejected Judah? hath thy soul loathed Zion? why hast thou smitten us, and there is no healing for us?" (xiv. 19).

The Lord had told the prophet it was useless to pray for the

offender, but the prophet scarcely believed it. It is hard for those who know God to believe that he will resort to judgment. Jonah said: "I knew thou wouldst not destroy Nineveh, I knew I was on a fool's errand; I knew thy mercy, thy love, thy pity; I had been calling, In forty days Nineveh should be destroyed, and I knew that if Nineveh but whimpered thou wouldst humiliate me and spare the city." So it is, the individual must go down, the personal consciousness must be rebuked; the city must be saved, the man must be redeemed, and the redeeming God will presently talk to the complaining prophet, and mayhap reconcile him.

"Are there any among the vanities of the Gentiles that can cause rain? or can the heavens give showers?" (xiv. 22).

Remember it was a time of dearth. The question turned upon the presence of grass; there was no grass, and therefore the hind calved in the field and forsook its own offspring, that it might abate its own hunger, seeking grass in some far-away place. Natural instincts were subdued and overcome, and the helpless offspring was left in helplessness, that the poor dying mother, hunger smitten, might find a mouthful of green herbage somewhere. And the ground was dust; the ploughmen were ashamed, they resorted to that last sign of Oriental desperation and grief, to cover their heads, because there was no rain, no grass; and now the prophet asks, "Are there any among the vanities of the Gentiles than can cause rain?" What can the idols do? If they can give rain, let them give it now. Can the heavens themselves give showers—the blue heavens that look so kind—can they of themselves and as it were by their own motion pour a baptism of water upon the earth? No. This is the act of the living God, the providence of the redeeming Father, the miracle of love. Thus we are driven in various ways to pray. You never know what a man is religiously, until he has been well tried, hungry a long time, and had no water to drink, until his tongue is as a burning sting in his mouth, until it hardens like metal, and if he can then move his lips you may find the coward trying to pray.



## PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY GOD, thou art always asking for the absent. Thou canst not be satisfied because many are in thy banqueting-house; every vacant seat troubles thine heart: God is love. Thou art always saying, If ye will return, I will receive you. Yea, thou dost say more—I will receive you graciously and love you freely. The hospitality of God is boundless. Once we were as sheep going astray, but now we have returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls, by the grace of God. Wondrous grace! all-including love! Behold, the mercy of the Lord endureth for ever. By the grace of God we are what we are,—still bad, imperfect, unwise, yet having some sense of the invisible, the eternal, the divine; having some sense of the sinfulness of sin, and some hatred of the abominable thing, and some desire to throw our arms around the Cross and cry our hearts out for very shame and penitence. This is thy doing. We love the agony; it is a blessed pain; this is woe which is the beginning of joy; this is godly sorrow which worketh repentance not to be repented of, the liberty of full access to God, the liberty of pardon. May we know it more and more, and pass through all paroxysms and rendings of life into the infinite calm. There is no other way. Every kingdom worth having is entered by a strait gate and a narrow road. This is thine appointment, and it is good, for we have experienced it in all lower things. That which comes easily goes easily. Behold, our agony of heart is in the pledge of our sonship, and is the assurance that thou art going to do great things. When all the discipline is done, when all the piercing and beating and moulding shall be accomplished, when all the firing shall be over, when the poor furnace shall cool down because there is no more dross to burn, then we shall thank thee for every pang; our memory shall treasure somewhat of the pains we bore, and we shall bless God that having come out of great tribulation we can never know it any more. We have done wickedly, we have excited our fears, we have misused our faculties, we have shown genius in crime, yea, inspiration in wickedness. God pity the lives that repent; the Lord weep over our tears himself, and so sweeten them. We come with these petitions. We know how great they are, how large is our request: but what are they compared with thine infinity! Amen

## Chapter xv.

1. Then said the Lord unto me, Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my mind could not be toward this people: cast them out of my sight, and let them go forth. [Love itself disappointed; forbearance exhausted; the well-understood prevalence of prayer terminated; the mightiest priests

divested of influence, because their clients were so bad: we can outwear, we can exhaust, God,—“The door was shut.”]

2. And it shall come to pass, if they say unto thee, Whither shall we go forth [into what fair land, into what sunny paradise]? then thou shalt tell them, Thus saith the Lord; Such as are for death, to death; and such as are for the sword, to the sword; and such as are for the famine, to the famine; and such as are for the captivity, to the captivity. [That is the paradise of wickedness! “Whither shall we go forth” indeed,—as if that could be a question for wicked men to ask! There can be but one destiny for iniquity, and that is darkness. Do not let the wicked man speculate as to the future. If Christian men venture to conjecture, so be it; they may have some justification for their attempt to solve the insoluble: but the wicked man has no enigma about the future; there is no alternative for him; his is a pit unfathomable; if he has choice, let it lie between death and sword and famine and captivity, for they all mean the same thing.]

3. And I will appoint over them four kinds, saith the Lord: the sword to slay, and the dogs to tear, and the fowls of the heaven, and the beasts of the earth, to devour and destroy. [Oh, what it cost God to say that! It reads like poetry,—it rent the heart of him that spake it. There is no rhetoric in this denunciation; it is heartbreak, God’s sorrow, infinite pain. The sword never slew a man without first wounding God; the dogs never tore a child of heaven without the parent feeling the pain. Yet it must come to this. God would seem himself to be under law.]

4. And I will cause them to be removed into all kingdoms of the earth, because of Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah king of Judah, for that which he did in Jerusalem. [But why should others suffer for Manasseh? They must do so; they are educated by this suffering; a sense of responsibility is developed in them thereby; they must rise and say to Manasseh and to every evil king, Thou shalt not do this; thou art not injuring thyself only, but the kingdom. The people must take care of the state; they must not allow their kings to drink, and break covenants, and sink into deeper and deeper bondage to evil: they must rise in their royalty and say, No: we will uncrown thee, we will behead thee, we will inflict judgment upon thee. A king cannot hurt himself alone; he kills the kingdom when he sins.]

5. For who shall have pity upon thee, O Jerusalem? or who shall bemoan thee? or who shall go aside to ask how thou doest? [All interest in thee has ceased; thou mayest now do whatsoever thou wilt; no heart cares for thee; no eye looks upon thee as a jewel; thou hast destroyed thyself; thou hast torn down the throne; thou hast broken the sceptre; the diadem is crushed under thy feet: thou who wast the gem of history shall no longer be regarded; if thou moanest, men shall not ask where the moaning came from. To this issue wickedness ever comes! “There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.”]

### SEVEN MORE QUESTIONS.

A TERRIBLE fate is indicated by these inquiries. The rejection was awful in its completeness and sternness; the tempest of the Lord seemed to break upon the rejected people

from all the points of the compass : "I will appoint over them four kinds, saith the Lord : the sword to slay, and the dogs to tear, and the fowls of the heaven, and the beasts of the earth, to devour and destroy" (xv. 3). How much it took to make God utter these words the imagination of man can never discover. We read them as if they were rhetorical terms, but they are words of the heart, saturated with tears, expressions of an inconceivable and inexpressible agony. And Jerusalem has come into such state that none shall turn aside "to ask how thou doest." None shall have pity upon Jerusalem. Where Western nations say, "How do you do?" Eastern peoples said, "Is it peace?" The salutation in the East was always one of "Peace be with you," and the inquiry addressed from friend to friend was, "Is it peace?" None would inquire after the peace of Jerusalem, none would concern himself to know what pain was at her heart, what darkness beclouded her vision. Have we not had experience of the same kind in some degree? Have we not been outcasts, and as the off-scouring of all things? Men that once took an interest in us take an interest no longer; it is no more any concern of theirs how we are, where we are, what we are. We could explain the indifference if we were faithful to ourselves: is there not a cause? The cause is not known to the very men who adopt the policy of indifference, but there is a ministry always acting upon the human mind, directing it and inspiring it, although the mind itself be unconscious of the mysterious action. Sad beyond all sadness is it when no man says to us with his heart, How are you? is it peace? are you at peace? have you joy?—when we feel ourselves suddenly in a crowd, surging and hastening onward, not caring whether we live or die. It is worse than useless, it is impious, to mourn this condition of affairs as if it were a great mystery, when we know in our heart of hearts that we deserve to be scouted, abandoned, forgotten. The Lord does not inflict this punishment upon Jerusalem without revealing the reason. It is as usual a moral reason, a spiritual explanation. When the heart goes wrong all the circumference of which it is the centre is enfeebled, loses pith and forcefulness of pulse and energy, and collapses like a thing that has been depleted and exhausted.

“ Shall iron break the northern iron and the steel ? ” (xv. 12).

It is impossible to explain these words to the unanimous satisfaction of all men. The general explanation, according to a large consensus of opinion, is that the prayer of the prophet cannot break the inflexible purpose of Jehovah. Jeremiah is still concerned for Jerusalem, for his countrymen, and he will still pray, though, as we have just seen, he has been forbidden to pray, and has been told that if the mightiest intercessors that ever lived were to lift up their heads in devoutest argument they would not be listened to, for heaven was offended and mighty in just indignation. Now the question is put, not by Jeremiah, but by another : “ Shall iron break the northern iron and the steel ? ” Is there any iron in the south that can stand against the iron of the north ? Has not the iron of the north been proved in a thousand controversies, and has it ever failed ? Who will smite that northern iron with straw ? Who will break it with a weapon of wood ? Who will set his own frail hand against an instrument so tremendous ? The argument, then, would seem to be—Why pray to me for these people ? It is as iron applied to the iron of the north, which has been seen to fail in innumerable instances : all the prayers that can now be offered to heaven would be broken upon the threshold of that sanctuary and fall back in fragments upon the weary intercessor ; the day has closed, the door is shut, the offended angel of grace has flown away on eagle pinions, and the sister angel of mercy can no longer be found : pray no more for Jerusalem. Thus the Lord dramatically represents himself ; and in all this dramatic reply to the interrogations and pleadings of earth there is a great principle indicated ; that principle is that the day closes—“ My Spirit shall not always strive with men.” We may mortally offend the very love of God. In this way only can God represent the exhaustion of his patience, the termination of his pity. Do not imagine, the Lord would say, that you can fight fire with straw ; do not suppose that your puny arm can successfully controvert omnipotence. There is a time when prayer is wasted breath, when the intercession of all the suppliants that ever took the kingdom of heaven by violence shall fail of its effect. These are awful words. If a man had invented them, we should have denied their truthfulness and their force ; but when we hear them

as from above we confirm them, we say, It is right, we do not deserve to be heard; if we had to assign ourselves to a fate, we dare not plant in the wilderness of our solitude one single flower; we have done the things we ought not to have done, we have left undone the things we ought to have done; all we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way. Even the claims of nature are exhausted. Once we should have thrust our very flesh into the presence of Jehovah and said, Thou didst make it, and therefore thou art bound to take care of it. But we have deprived ourselves of any ground even from that natural argument. We have sinned at every point, we have left no finger clean; no hair upon the head but is a witness against us that we have tried to debase and diabolise the temple of God.

“Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable, which refuseth to be healed? wilt thou be altogether unto me as a liar, and as waters that fail?” (xv. 18).

Here it is that the prophet would say, Wilt thou be unto me as a winter torrent, as water that has utterly dried up in the summer-time when I need it most? art thou a capricious God? art thou to be looked upon as men look upon waterfalls after a great rain, hastening to scenic landscapes that they may see the cascade in its fulness? and when I am thirsty wilt thou be unto me as a dried-up brook, a torrent channel, in which no cup of cold water can be found? wilt thou be unto me as a liar? And may not the Lord himself apply this very inquiry to us in another but still related sense? Are we not fickle in our religion? Are we not as a winter torrent that is dried up in the summer? Are we not sometimes enthusiastic? Does not our feeling flow, cascade-like, in great abundance, and make music by its very fall and rush and energy? At other times are we not like a dried-up torrent bed, without emotion, without heart, without response to the desire of God? Are we not as trees that are laden with leaves only? and that have no figs for him who is weary and hungry? Turn the questions round, look at them in every phase and aspect, make each one an inquiry of a direct kind addressed to the heart as well as addressed to heaven, and thus out of the questions as out of grapes press the last drop of wine.

"Shall a man make gods unto himself, and they are no gods?" (xvi. 20).

Is not that impossible? From a certain point of view it is utterly impossible, and yet from another point of view it is the very thing men are doing every day in the week. Questions cannot always be answered literally. There may be a moral explanation under the literary definition. Sometimes we are in what may be termed theoretical moods, and then we would pronounce it impossible that any man could be so impiously foolish as to try to make a god. Sometimes we laugh an ignorant laugh at the idols of the heathen. They may be better men than we are; their idols may be more to them than our God is to us. There is an idolatry of the letter, an idolatry of formal doctrine, an idolatry of times and circumstances and ceremonies—a mockery never to be forgiven. Who does not make himself gods as he needs them?—not visible gods, otherwise they might bring down upon themselves the contempt of observers, and the contempt of their very makers; but ambitions, purposes, policies, programmes, methods of procedure,—all these may be looked upon as refuges and defences and hidden sanctuaries into which the soul would go for defence and protection when the tempest rages loudly and fiercely. A subtle thing is this god-making. Every man is at times a polytheist—that is, a possessor or a worshipper of many gods. The Lord could never bring the mind of his people directly and lovingly to the reception of the One Deity. It would seem to be the last thought of man that there can be, by metaphysical necessity, only one God. There cannot be a divided Deity. Yet it is this very miracle that the imagination of man has performed. He has set all round the household innumerable idols which he takes down according to the necessity of the hour. He knows he is intellectually foolish, morally the victim of self-delusion, practically an utterly unwise and impracticable man; yet somehow, by force not to be put into equivalent words, he will do this again and again, yea he takes to himself power to fill up vacancies, so that if any clay god or imagined idol has failed him he puts another in the place of the one that did not fulfil his prayer.

These are the charges that are brought against men, these are the bitter accusations with which God tests and tries the heart of



the world. The difficulty is that we are not the same practically as we are theoretically. We seem to believe in theory, and every day to violate our theory by our practice. This is the unpardonable heterodoxy—the heterodoxy of schism in the soul, of divorce of things that belong to one another by eternal right and claim. Who would deny the existence of God? Hardly any man. Yet he may be a more honest man who denies God than he who only theoretically affirms him. Men who deny God have to pay for their non-belief to-day. It cannot be a pleasant thing to them from a social point of view that they deny God, for their very denial costs them daily bread, social repute, high standing amongst their fellows, yea, and keeps them out of office and out of promotion and out of human confidence. Let us be just to every man, though he may differ from us by the width of infinity. It may be the easiest thing in the world to confess God, to be sure that he exists; and to live every moment of our life as if the heavens were empty, and as if destiny were but another term for the grave. We do not believe in God: if we believed in God, we should have no fear, no anxiety, we should have no difficulty; every battle would be but the beginning of victory, every suffering would be the cloud behind which is hidden a glory that would be otherwise intolerable, every step would be the step of a conqueror to his crown. We only believe in God somewhere in the head, in a theoretical sense, and we shudder when other men deny him, forgetting that in their denying they may be exhibiting a completer faith than we ourselves are displaying. Will a man make gods unto himself, and they are no gods? The answer is, Yes, he will do so; he has done it; every day he repeats the mischievous miracle.

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked [incurably diseased]: who can know it?” (xvii. 9).

It is a singular thing that these men knew so much about the human heart. They were marvellous dreamers and metaphysicians, and analysts of human motive and impulse and purpose, to come to such definite conclusions about the heart. It is not a man talking about his own heart, limiting his doctrine by his personal consciousness; it is an accuser standing up in heaven's brightest light and charging the earth with apostasy. We want

to deny it, but our denial is contradicted by facts ; not by vulgar facts, that is, open, patent, obvious facts, but by very subtle, recondite, remote facts. All men do not show the heart disease in the same way ; yea, there are some who would seek to cover up their own disease by a liberal criticism of other men. The inquiry, however, is, "Who can know it?" Can the man himself know it? Only in a certain sense. Who can know it? No observer, no critic, no judge. The heart was never seen in action. It has been felt, it has been known to be there, it has been the most eminent fact in the whole situation, and yet it has the curtaining power by which it shuts out brightest, keenest eyes, and laughs behind the arras at the fool who seeks to peer into the mystery. Men do not know themselves : hence the vanity of boasting ; hence the impiety of being assured that whoever else may fall we can never fall. There is no man, woman, or child on earth that may not fall to-morrow : hence the brutality as well as the ignorance of pedantic Pharisaism, of saying what we have done, of indicating our superiority, and telling God that we are the patterns of all virtue and honour. Man needs to have the heart revealed unto him. Where is that revelation? Only in Holy Scripture. "The word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." It can find an interstice where interstice there seems to be none, and the hand that uses that double-edged sword sometimes turns it so as to be assured that the iniquity has been found out and the disease has been discovered. Let us shut ourselves up with our Bible, and then we shall know ourselves, we shall hear our inmost thoughts expressed in definite terms, and we shall catch sight of ourselves in a mirror, and be affrighted by the ghastly revelation. Not until we get this view of human nature can we have any real gospel work. The gospel is a mistake if human nature be not in a condition of apostasy. The instrument which seeks the elevation of man is ill-adapted to its purpose if man can lift so much as one hand to help himself : "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." Let the weary heart exclaim—Lord, I am lost: pity me! then will begin the upper, diviner life.

"O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? \* saith the Lord " (xviii. 6).

The answer is Yes—and No. The prophet was sent down to a potter's house: he says, "I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hands of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it. Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord." Yes—No. So far as all physical energy is concerned, the Lord can do with us as the potter does with the clay; but the Lord himself cannot make a little child love him: there is a point at which the clay lives, thinks, reasons, defies. The potter can only work upon the clay up to a given point; so long as it is soft he can make it a vessel of honour or a vessel of dishonour, he can make it this shape or that; but once let him burn it, and it is clay no longer in the sense in which he can fashion it according to model or design. A marvellous thing is this, that the Lord has made any creature that can defy him; and that we can all defy him is the testimony of every day's experience. Let the Lord say, Can I not crush the universe? and the answer must be, Yes, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye; thou hast but to close thy fingers upon it, and it is dead, and thou canst throw the ashes away. But almightiness has its limits. There is no almightiness in the moral region. Here is what is not often clearly understood. Men say the Lord cannot be almighty, or he would not have any bad men in the world. That is a mistaken definition of almightiness. So far as physical effort is concerned, almightiness is supreme, the constellations are nothing, the phalanx and army of the world amount to nothing, the Lord bloweth upon them and they wither away; but when we come into the moral region every man by virtue of his being a man can defy the Creator that fashioned him. The Lord cannot conquer the human will by any exercise of mere omnipotence: the will is to be conquered by instruction, persuasion, grace, moral inducement, spiritual ministry, exhibition of love upon love, till the exhibition rises into sacrifice and indicates

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\* See also, *post*, p. 441.

itself in the Cross of Christ. "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock." Why does he not go in? Because he has no key of that door that can open it by force. Why does he not break it with one tremendous blow? Because then the heart would be crushed and killed, and would not be persuaded into becoming a guest-chamber for the king. We have it in our power to say No to God, to defy the Lord, to withdraw ourselves from the counsel and guidance of heaven.

"Will a man leave the snow of Lebanon which cometh from the rock of the field? or shall the cold flowing waters that come from another place be forsaken?" (xviii. 14).

Can a man be such a fool as this? The historical answer is Yes, he can; the experimental answer is, We ourselves do this very thing. "My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." Is that possible? Theoretically, no; practically, yes,—not possible only, but actual. Who would be all the year round away from the snow-stream? Who would go into wildernesses where there is no water? unto deserts where there are no fountains and springs and wells? Who would not keep near the spring? who would not say, Presently Lebanon will send us down water, melted snow? "Lebabon" itself means *white*. It is said, poetically as well as historically, that the summit of Lebanon is faithful to its snow, and that the snow is faithful to the summit of Lebanon. Let the sun do what he may elsewhere—create paradises, tropical luxuriance of plant and flower and fruit—yet Lebanon is faithful to the snow, and the snow is faithful to Lebanon. There are times when we can run away from Lebanon, saying, There is an abundance of water everywhere. There are other times when we must come back and say, We want what help we can now get from the snow-white summits of Lebanon. So it is with God. We run away from him so easily; but let the child sicken, let the life tremble, let strength be displaced by weakness, let prosperity flee away, and dark adversity settle upon the rooftop; then we say, Where is Lebanon, where is the fountain of living water, where are the streams that make glad our poor human life? Thus poverty, dearth, drought, bring in more believers than are brought

in by an abundant harvest, and by vineyards purple with luscious grapes. Look at that road: how sunny! how rich! on either side are the fields, wheatfields, and fruitful orchards, and abounding harvests of every kind: who comes along that way to the church? Nobody. Look at that other road—bleak, barren, desolate; a place where death might live, a God-forsaken spot of earth: are there travellers there? Yes, a thousand strong, and a thousand more are coming down the hillside yonder. What is their destiny? The sanctuary. Why? They are in trouble, in poverty, in distress; they are friendless, homeless, hopeless. Will there be room for them in the sanctuary? There may be: his mercy endureth for ever: none can tell what his mercy may do: there may be. Will those rich velvet-clad people never come? Not in velvet. If they do come, how will they come? Nakedly, forsakenly, self-accusingly, broken-heartedly. Will they not try to feast the Lord with their wheat? If they did they would but mock him, and he would consume it, and make the black soot fall upon their hypocritical faces. Have they not heaven enough in their vineyards and oliveyards? There is no heaven there. So it ever has been in all human history. When the water has failed men have tried to pray; when the harvest has broken down men have wondered whether they could not find in the church some comfort for their disappointment and their poverty. Blessed be God for that idea after all. We need it; we could not have borne the things we have endured but for religious help, religious sympathy, and religious hope. Christ never received the rich full prosperous man, saying to him, Your riches make you welcome, and your prosperity will make your religion sit easily upon you. Never! he has said, "How hardly"—that is, with what infinite difficulty and struggle—"shall a rich man enter the kingdom of heaven." But broken-hearted men, contrite souls, penitents that had no excuse to offer, these he has received in abundance: and let it be said everywhere, in every tongue, in every tone of music, loud as thunder, softly as a whispered confidence—"This man receiveth sinners."

## PRAYER.

How wondrous are thy words, thou Lord of hosts, God of all the earth, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Who can find out the Almighty unto perfection? There is no searching of his understanding. Thou dost lead the blind by a way that they know not; yet thou dost bring them into light and liberty ere they are fully aware that thine hand is upon them. Thou art leading all men: thy purpose cannot fail of accomplishment; the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord; every heart shall be loyal to Christ; the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. Thou hast set forth life and immortality in the light of the Cross; to all men thou hast given the reward of faith; thou wilt not withhold from faith any blessing of heaven. Thou delightest in faith; without faith it is impossible to please thee: Lord, increase our faith, that we may make our Father glad because he sees our hearts ascending to himself. We would no longer walk by sight; it is a false leader: we cannot see anything as it really is; we are deluded by appearances and passing aspects; we do not see the innermost essence and real meaning of all that is about us: give us the eyes of faith, the sensitiveness of love, the responsiveness of gratitude; make us spiritual rather than material, may we have more soul than flesh: and thus may we live in continual communion with God, feeling thy going and thy coming as the going and the coming of a summer warmth. We bless thee for all we know of thy nature, for all we have partaken of thy grace: it is good to live in God, without him there is no life. May we, through Jesus Christ our Saviour who loved us and gave himself for us, know thee more truly and really and helpfully, that so we may disdain the heavens and the earth, and seek for their Creator, and know no rest until we worship him who made them all. At present we are overwhelmed by them, we speak of their vastness and dignity and glory, not knowing that all these things shall be dissolved and end with a great noise. We seek the King, we come by the way of the Cross; we walk over Calvary that we may reach Bethany, and from Bethany we would ascend with our ascending Lord, and enjoy with him what we may of the throne on which he is seated. Thou hast given us great promises, thou hast held out a great light before us, the whole horizon is aflame with glory: may we see beyond, and because of the glory that is to come may we despise the shame of the Cross. Bind us to thyself; work in us a new kinship with thine own nature; give us the new birth, the joy of its peace, the rapture of its liberty. Amen.

## Chapter xvi. 14, 15.

"Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that it shall no more be said, The Lord liveth, that brought up the children of Israel out of the



land of Egypt; but, The Lord liveth, that brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north, and from all the lands whither he had driven them: and I will bring them again into their land that I gave unto their fathers."

### LARGER PROVIDENCES.

**T**HUS epochs are made; thus new dates are introduced into human history; thus the less is merged in the greater; the little judgment is lost in the great judgment, and the mercy that once appeared to be so great seems to be quite small compared with the greater mercy that has healed and blessed our life. This is the music and this is the meaning of the passage. Once the great thought was the Egyptian deliverance: how marvellous, how unexpected, how mighty was the arm of the Lord! how Pharaoh trembled under the stroke of the unseen sword! For a long time that thought held dominion over the minds of the people; but there came a period when it was scarcely to be named by reason of the mightier deliverance, the more surprising and startling liberation, the return of the people from exile, harder in its oppressions and endurances than ever had been known in the reckoned history of mankind. The passage may be read in either of two ways: either as referring to one judgment greater than another, or to one mercy greater than another: both readings would be right; it is better not to separate them, but to combine them, and out of their united strength to draw this lesson, that God is always making new and larger epochs, always developing his providences on new and larger scales, always surprising the universe with new manifestations of his power and glory. The case in Egypt was bad enough; the Israelites had enough to suffer there; they thought it impossible that anything severer could ever befall their poor lives; they supposed themselves to be in extremity of distress: yet Egyptian experience was forgotten. What is experience worth? It is worth exactly what we make of it; it will not follow us and insist upon being looked at and estimated and applied; it is, so to say, either a negative or a positive possession; we can make it either, according to the exercise of our will and inclination. Some men have a gift of forgetting all their holy, sacred, instructive past; they have no yesterday, even in the sense of having a grave in which they have buried many a

tormenting memory ; yesterday is not a grave, it is a simple land of forgetfulness, a section so to say of oblivion ; it does not grow fruits and flowers of to-day's nourishment and suggestion and stimulus, it is a forgotten nightmare. Other men live on their experience ; they fall back upon it and say, What wonders were wrought for me years ago ! They bring up all their yesterdays and turn them into a phalanx of helpers, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped me, and he hath not helped me for a hundred days that he may desert me on the hundred-and-first ; every help he has given lies on the road to final triumph. Set the helps in order, in historical and moral sequence, they all go in one line, and the line terminates only in victory—that is to say, in heaven. How often we vow not to forget our experience ; yet it is stolen from us in the night-time, and we awake in the morning empty-handed, empty-minded, beggared to the uttermost point of destitution. We write our vows in water : who can make any impression on the ocean ? whole fleets have passed over the sea, not a track is left behind where the waves were sundered ; they roll together again, as if with emulous energy they seek to obliterate the transient mark of the intrusive ships. It is so with ourselves. We have forgotten even our friends ; whilst we are waiting for their next benefaction we have forgotten their last. Let no man think he has sounded the whole depth of God's providence in this matter of punishment or of benediction and blessing. History has recorded nothing yet ; history is getting its pen ready for the real registration of divine ministry in human affairs. No judgment has yet befallen the world worth naming compared with the judgment that may at any moment be revealed. They say that the earth was once drenched and drowned : it was but a sprinkling of water compared with the infinite cataract that God could pour down. We have seen streamlets, little silver rills of water trickling down the green hillsides : we have not seen the hidden floods. Do not tempt them : there they are, locked up amid the rocks of eternity. What God could do if he pleased, if his anger were excited ! “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Do not say we have had the rain, and there is no more to fall. There is a flood which no ark could ride. They say that once the clouds were shaken by invisible hands, and there came out of them fire and brimstone

exceeding hot, exceeding much, and the whole cities were burnt up and left in hot ashes, as if God had initialled them in sign of disapproval. We know nothing about God's fire, we cannot understand the full judgment of the Most High : what we have seen is a spark, a little spluttering spark, one little hot cinder or speck of white ash : the great fire burns in the volcanoes unseen ; at any moment those volcanoes may be let loose, and lava may fall upon a condemned universe. Do not mock God ; do not defy him or tempt him : what you have had is but the sting of a whip ; he could smite you with a thong of scorpions. Rather say, God pity us, God spare us ; remember that we are but dust ; a wind that cometh for a little time and then passeth away : smite us not in thine hot anger, O loving One ; in wrath remember mercy. We do not know what plagues God could send upon the earth. He could change our language, so that we should not know the speech of father, mother, child, the familiar tongue that filled home with music ; as for our skin, how he could scorch it, and blotch it, and fill it with uncleanness, and make us afraid of one another as men might stand aghast in the presence of the risen but unspeaking dead. Again the lesson comes upon us : Be not presumptuous against the divine government ; do not say, God cannot do this, or send down that judgment ; if he forbore, it is because his mercy restrains, not because his judgment is impotent.

Yet God can seldom, perhaps never, speak of judgment alone. He has no interest in that grim theme ; he does not want to speak about it ; judgment is his strange work, mercy is his peculiar delight. Yet judgment must have some place in human history ; the ministry of fear cannot be dismissed. It would be idle sentiment that desired always to see nothing but morning dew, or noontide light, and feel nothing but summer zephyrs, benedictions with wings, coming lightly, silently from above to bless the world. Such a desire would spring from ignorance, and not from a philosophical or wise conception of the relation and purpose of things. We must have the whip ; we must have the prison. Society has found that out in its own civilisation, which it claims to be a piece of its own philosophy. Society has elaborated a civilisation. What have we in that civilisation ? A

heaven and a hell. You cannot get rid of the Biblical lines and distributions of things. You have reward and punishment; you have a benediction pronounced by paternal or pastoral voice, holy, sweet, noble in dignity; and you have denunciation, sentencing to darkness, solitude, or sharp penalty of other kinds. Even in society you have reward and punishment; so in the great society which God is building up for himself, and therefore for itself in the largest sense of the term, we have judgment as well as mercy—indeed, we could have no mercy were there no judgment. Mercy is a night-child; mercy wanders out most eagerly at midnight; when it is darkest mercy is busiest; when our moments are fewest mercy invests herself with her chief eloquence and her noblest persuasiveness, and begs us to surrender and return. So in this connection the exile is to end. In the twenty-third chapter of this prophecy and the seventh verse we have almost identical words, but they take a specific term, for one is promised by name (ver. 5): “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.” Not only is there a promise, there is a predicted Saviour, a Man, the Son of God, who is able and willing to work out this mighty deliverance, and able to cause the Israelites to return from the north and be liberated from the hand of tyranny, a hand so mighty that the pressure of the hand of Pharaoh seemed gentleness itself. History has always been waiting for this man. The Old Testament is a book of discontent; it never falls into peaceful rhythm until the prophets have said that One was coming who should rule all things in righteousness and mercy. “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” Continue the cataract of nomenclature until you have brought into it every word significant of majesty, dignity, tenderness, outvying and outstripping the tenderness of shepherd and nurse and mother.

By a natural accommodation of the passage, we may be led into quite another line of thinking and illustration: “Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that it shall no more be said . . .

but"; and between these words we may put in our own experience and our own commentaries upon life and destiny. Thus: Behold, the days come that it shall no more be said that we have a Creator, but we have a Redeemer. Men shall not talk about creation. There are some men who are content to talk about one infinitesimal speck of creation; they have not learned the higher philosophy, the fuller wisdom, the riper, vaster law. They are gathering what they can with their hands; they are first the admirers, secondly the devotees, and thirdly the victims of the microscope. They have made an idol of that piece of glazed brass; they who mock the heathen for worshipping ivory and stone and tree and sun may perhaps be creating a little idol of their own. Behold, the days come when men shall no longer talk about the body, but about the soul. It is time we had done with physiology. If we have not mastered the body, what poor scholars we have been! And yet how far men are from having mastered it in the sense of being able to heal it! If men knew as much about the healing of the body as they do about what ails the body, how extremely able and useful they would be! But the doctor is the first man to say, We can tell you what the matter is, but—we will see you again to-morrow. God keeps the true healing with himself. He has shown us a plant or two whose juices we can cause to exude for our momentary healing, but he has not shown us where grows the plant that holds in it the juice of physical immortality. Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when men shall no more talk about human deliverance, or deliverance from human extremity, but they shall talk about liberation from diabolic captivity; they shall say they have been loosed from their sins, they have been disimprisoned and set at liberty as to the dominion of their passions and desires and appetences; they shall speak about the higher emancipation, and everywhere men shall be eloquent about the Deliverer who drew the soul from Egyptian and Chaldean tyranny, and gave it liberty and joy in the Holy Ghost. The whole subject of human speech shall be changed; men shall not talk about Egypt, but about Canaan; they shall not talk about the law, but about the higher law; they shall not talk about the outward, but about the inward. Thus dates are introduced into human history. You do not believe in Jesus Christ? Then why do you date your



letters by his birth? Why not be an infidel out and out, and make a date of your own—say from the day when you began to illumine the world. That would make a striking date at the top of a letter: why not be a thorough infidel, a downright disbeliever, a thorough-paced anti-Christian? Why do you borrow a date? Why do you dip your pen, and write part of the Bible at the head of every letter? It is thus that new epochs are made; it is thus that reluctant homage is paid by men who would gladly rub out with one hand what they write with the other. The time will come when we shall not talk about Saturday, but about Sunday. For thousands of years men spoke of Saturday and called that the Sabbath; they had a creation-Sabbath, they looked around them and said, All these things we are told were finished, and God rested on the seventh day, and the seventh day we keep in thankful memorial of the completion of these things we see overhead and underfoot. It was a poor Sabbath; it was all the world could do at that time. Now men forget creation in redemption, and they say when speaking with Christian hearts and expressive piety, Christ the Lord is risen to-day.

What is the sun? nothing; even the scientific men have found that out: it is only like everything else we see, a development of a tuft of fire-cloud; nobody knowing where it came from, or where it is going to. Philosophy has made a doormat of the universe, and has wiped its feet upon that mat, and then sat down upon nothing. It is a poor issue, it is a miserable catastrophe: but the Christian, say of him what you may, comes with a noble poem, if not with a noble revelation; he says to the nations, To-day we were redeemed; to-day for the first time the word Liberty was spoken to us with its fullest emphasis and its divinest meaning; to-day a charter was handed to us which we can so use as to make the whole world green with celestial verdure, beautiful with supernal summer. The man who speaks that message ought to speak truly; the words have music enough in them to be divine; the declaration so touches the spirit as to constrain the spirit to say, Well, would God it were true! Some men have accepted it in its full truthfulness, and to-day they say, It doth not yet appear what we



shall be, but we have a great promise hidden in our hearts ; one day we shall see him who did this, and we shall be like him because the sight of his beauty shall transfigure us into a kindred loveliness. The time will come when men will not speak about being born, but about being "born again." Your birthday was your deathday,—or only the other aspect of it. Date your born-again day from the beginning, the morning of your immortality. Drop the lower theme, seize the higher ; dismiss the noise, and entreat the music to take full possession of your nature. Behold, the day is come, saith the Lord, when men shall no longer talk about prayer, but about praise. The old prayer days will be over ; they were needful as part of our experience and education, but the time will come when prayer will be lost in praise ; the time will come when work will be so easy as to have in it the throb and joy of music ; the time will come when it will be easy to live, for life will carry no burden and know the strain of no care ; the days of anxiety will be ended, solicitude will be a forgotten word, and the companionship of God and his angels shall constitute our heaven. We must now praise, we must now suffer, we must now work ; but all these things, rightly done, lie on the road towards a fruition in which they shall be forgotten, not forgotten in any sense suggesting unthankfulness, but forgotten as men forget March in June, as men forget the grain of corn in the golden head of wheat ; forgotten as men might forget the little helpless infant when he has grown into a giant, a hero, a man of might. Thus the law is not abrogated, but fulfilled.

## Chapter xviii. 6.

"Cannot I do with you as this potter ? saith the Lord."

### THE DIVINE POTTER.

WHAT did the potter do ? " I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred [spoiled] in the hand of the potter : so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it." He did not consult the clay ; he acted upon his own judgment, he carried out his own will. " Whilst I was looking on the word of heaven came swiftly to my soul, and said, Cannot I the Lord do with you, O house of Israel, as this potter has done with the clay ? " That is an inquiry which may force itself by pressure of event and by tragedy of experience upon us all. Am I clay in the hands of the divine Potter ? The Bible does not say so : yet apparently this is the very thing that it does say. The context does not teach us that God is speaking about the individual man, or about personal salvation, or about the eternal destiny of the individual soul : the Lord is speaking about nations, empires, kingdoms, vessels which he only can handle. Moreover, he himself descends into reasoning, and therefore he gives up the arbitrary power or right, if he ever claimed it. He bases his action upon the conduct of the nation spoken about. So his administration is not arbitrary, despotic, independent, in any sense that denies the right of man to be consulted, or that undervalues the action of man as a moral agent. The potter did not reason with the clay : God did reason with Israel. The analogy, therefore, can only be useful up to a given point ; never overdrive any metaphor ; always distinguish between the purpose of the parable, its real substance, and its accessories, its incidental draperies and attachments. We may miss the meaning if we seek for it in the wrong place : the question should always

be, What does this author want to express? what is this poet speaking about? to what conclusion would this reasoner conduct us? Then, as to the accessory incident, colouring, and the like, let all these fall into their proper place; they contribute somewhat towards the general effect: but the question which we ought to put to ourselves, in justice to our own mental culture as well as in justice to the claims of the author, is, What is the meaning of this book, poem, argument, or exhortation?

Let us take the inquiry in its crudest and most ruthless form. Can we not do with a man as this man does with the clay? The answer is in a sense yes, in a larger sense no. Many inquiries can only be answered by a double reply. The men who would force us to a sharp yes or no are playing a trick upon us; they want to lay a trap for the unwary. No great question in life can be answered by a definite yes or no. As to mere matters of fact we can be very positive; but where the fact at all touches the line of reasoning, and where the fact is to be accounted for by processes of reasoning, then we must recognise the atmosphere as well as the naked event. As a matter of power, crudely defined, God can do with us as the potter does with the clay: but God himself has introduced a new element into power; he is no longer in relation to the soul simply and merely omnipotent, he has made himself a party. In so treating himself he exercised all his attributes. He need not have done so, but having done so he never shrinks from the conditions which he has created and which he has imposed. Observe, he does not give up any part of his sovereignty. In the first instance he created man, devised a great scheme and ministry of things: all this was done sovereignly; it was not man that was consulted as to his own creation, it was the Triune God that said, "Let us make man." The Lord then, having thus acted from the point of his sovereignty, has himself created a scheme of things within which he has been pleased to work as if he were a consenting and co-operating party.

This can easily be made clear. If it were a question of desert, then the Lord could surely throw us away. There is none righteous, no, not one: all we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way: there is not a man that doeth

good, and sinneth not. If it were a question of law-breaking, a question of trespass, and direct offence against the spirit of holiness, then no man could live were God to arise in judgment. But we are not dealing with a question of power or of desert, but with a question of moral right. God never claims the right to destroy any man against that man's will. On that assertion we base the whole philosophy of what may be called the evangelical theology. Find an instance if you can to the contrary. The record is open and is written in our mother tongue. When did God say, By the exercise of a potter's right I will break you, the soul, in pieces, although you want to be preserved and saved? When did Jesus Christ ever say to any man, You want to be saved, but I do not want to save you; I doom you to everlasting alienation from the throne of light and the sceptre of mercy? Never. The right to create never gives the right to destroy. It is questionable whether there is any right in destruction; it must rather be the realisation of a consequence happily necessary, than the infliction of a destructive blow. Hell is in the sin; hell is in the poison you drank; hell is in the deed of shame.

May not a man, changing the level of inquiry, do what he likes with his own? No. Society says no; law says no; the needful security without which progress is impossible says no. Yet we must define what is meant by "can" and "may" and "cannot." These words are not simple terms. The word "can" may be one of the largest words in the language; the word "cannot" may hide within its dissyllables all the philosophy of necessity, free-will, and all the attributes and elements which constitute the mystery which is called man. There are various kinds of power; the word "can" or "cannot" will apply to any one of them, but the word "can" or "cannot" must be defined in its applications and within its own atmosphere, and not on the pages of a dictionary. Yet, if you put the inquiry again, Cannot a man do what he likes with his own? we might say, Yes: first he must show — that he has something that is his own. That has never been shown yet. We have nothing that is our own. If there were only one man in all the world, he might possibly in a secondary sense have something that was his own; but the moment the man is pluralised his right is divided, modified, fixed to the extent of

the plurality. Then in the use of the word "can" we always come upon the farther word "cannot" at the same time. You can and you cannot, in one act. Why, how is that? Is not that a simple contradiction of terms? No, that statement, though apparently paradoxical, is one, and admits of easy reconciliation in both its members. If it were a question of mere power or physical ability, as we have often seen in our study of this Bible, we can do many things: but where are we at liberty simply to use ability or power in its most simple definition? Power is a servant; power is not an independent attribute that can do just what it likes: power says, What shall I do? I am an instrument, I am a faculty, but I am intended by the Sovereign of the universe to be a servant—the servant of judgment and conscience and duty and social responsibility. Power stands in an attitude of attention, awaiting the orders of conscience. You can, as we have often said, as a matter of simple ability, set fire to your house, yet you cannot: why do you not burn down these premises? You could do so: here are the lights, there is a handful of gunpowder, there an ounce of dynamite: why do you not blow up the house? You cannot. You can. Yes: you can, and you cannot. What keeps you back? Something invisible. God is invisible: no man hath seen God at any time. What restrains you? Spiritual power. Yet you are a materialist! What spiritual power? Reason: you have never seen it, weighed it, taken its dimensions, ascertained the velocity of its motion; reason—solemn, stern, gracious, all but divine reason—keeps you back. Why, you are almost a spiritual believer! Here you have two great invisible forces operating upon you, and you respond to the operation. Looking at your hand and at your resources you say you can; listening to reason you say you cannot. As a mere matter of dependent ability, probably many of you could wind up your business to-morrow morning, and dispose of it and leave it for ever. Have you the right to do so? You say you have. Is it a freehold? You say so. You can then get rid of it if you wish to do so: why do you not? You cannot. Why cannot you? Because of your wife, your children, your responsibilities, your future. It is not easy to commit even commercial suicide. A man must be a madman before he can put the razor to his throat. Yet the hand is strong, and the razor

is ready and the throat is bare ; the man could "his own quietus make with a bare bodkin." Yet he cannot : because this same majestic, tranquil reason says, Your life is not your own. Mere power therefore is one thing, mere ability, and it is a faculty that never ought to be exercised in itself, by itself, for itself. It must be always worked in consent, in union, in co-operation. I repeat, power—great, self-boasting power—must obey orders. "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God."

God has made man what he is, and therefore God must treat man as he is. God is not changeable, fickle ; God proceeds upon lines of reason. It has pleased God to enshrine his ministry amongst men in all the attributes and forms of reason. God acknowledges that he made man by the very way in which he consults man : "Come now, let us reason together." What is your case ? state the position, let me hear your arguments : oh, poor withered perverse soul, talk out all thy bad logic, it will do thee good to get rid of it in words : come now, let us reason together. God cannot deny his own work, he never has done so. God made man intelligent, and therefore he appeals to human intelligence ; God made man responsible, and therefore he demands from man an answer based upon reason. God made man redeemable, and therefore he came out to seek and to save man. The whole scheme of God, so far as it is dimly outlined amid the clouds of time, shows that the Lord has ever honoured man. How could he do otherwise ? He made man in his own image and likeness. The flesh was almost part of God when it was first made : "no man," then not God, "ever hated his own flesh ; but nourished it and cherished it, even as the Lord the church." When God and man stand face to face, for a moment there is a flash of light that seems like equality. Sometimes, for one bright glittering moment, man is almost like his Maker.

May not a man do what he likes with his own ? What is his own ? Not his child. He says, This child is my own ; we say, Yes and No. Once more we come upon the double reply. Every child has two fathers. There is a little measurable, individual father, and there is the greater father called Society : may we not recognise a third, and say, there is the Father in



heaven? Your child cannot speak, and yet you cannot do with it what you like; your child has no will, no opened judgment, and yet you cannot do with the child as you please. Society has taken its name, and its age, and the eyes of Society are upon that child night and day, and if you slew it at midnight you would have to answer for its blood at midday. What is your own? What hast thou that thou hast not received? What is this mystery of proprietorship? And what part of it do you hold? the land, or the landscape? the deeds, or the poetry? You may possibly be allowed to do what you like with your own when you get it.

Here, then, we rest, in presence of this great doctrine of divine sovereignty in relation to man. We may search the Bible from beginning to end to find that the sovereignty of God ever said to a man, I will not save you when you want to be saved, and we shall find no such instance in the record. With regard to nations, it is perfectly evident from the face of things that there is a Power that is placing nations where they are, and working up the great national unit to great national ends. We are not born where we would like to be born; we cannot have our own way as nations, saying, We will leave this region of ice, and go to a region of eternal sunshine. Nations cannot follow the sun. An individual may follow the strawberries all the year round, but a nation cannot. God has always had as it were a double policy, and it is because we have confounded the one policy with the other that we have been all our lifetime subject to bondage through fear lest God may have predestined us to hell. He never predestined any man to such a place. He predestined unrighteousness to hell, and nothing can ever get it into heaven; into that city nothing shall enter that is unholy, impure, defiled, or that maketh a lie. Eternity has never been at peace with wickedness. The infinite tranquillity of immeasurable and inexpressible duration has never been reconciled to one act of trespass, one deed of violence, one thought of wrong. Thy universe, O God, fights with thee against all unholiness: but neither God nor his universe fights against the sinner who wishes to get rid of his sin; then all the stars help him, all nature says, Poor child, take what light I can give thee

on the right road : and a voice in the wind says, Follow the footprints of the flowers, for all those footprints lead up to paradise : and then a great voice from heaven, great in its stillness, great in its subtle mystery of energy, says to the soul, Hope thou in God : behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world ; come, I will show thee Calvary, I will show thee the Cross, and read thee the writing that is upon it, for there is another superscription upon the wood than that written by Pilate ; come let us study together at Golgotha, and I will read off to thee all the eloquence of love, all the music of mercy, I will show thee the heart of God. "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God ;" let no man say, I am an outcast ; let no man reason that if he is to be saved he will be saved. He never reasons so about things which are nearer at hand. Why will he not carry up his common-sense to its noblest and broadest applications, and show that his reason is still a light within him to light him to higher heights, and not a dim lantern to light him down to some underground cellar where there is nothing but darkness and nothing but imprisonment ? You know that you have not your own consent when you say that God does not mean you to be saved. You know in the depth of your consciousness that you are telling a lie. You know that the contrary view would fall more rhythmically into all the movement of nature of providence and grace. I charge you, before God and his holy angels, that you know this. Obey the impulse of this holy knowledge !

## Chapter xix.

### DRAMATISED TRUTH.

“**T**HUS saith the Lord, Go and get a potter’s earthen bottle” (ver. 1). We do not like dramatised truth, and therefore there are large portions of the Bible which we do not admire. We admire those portions sentimentally, but not practically; we look upon them as upon pictures of long ago, never intended for reproduction or imitation. Were a man to dramatise the truth now, he would be reported as an eccentricity. Jesus Christ dramatised it in parables; Jeremiah and Ezekiel dramatised it in various ways: we like this dramatisation to be confined to the Bible, as we like the Commandments also to be confined to the same limit; we never like to see any of them loose, and doing active work in the Church. In this way we allow the Bible to become old, an archaic treasure, a very valuable curiosity. We have seen in the previous chapter what the potter could do with the vessel. Let us make no mistake about that vessel, for it was then in wet clay, and so long as a vessel is in wet clay the potter can do with it what he pleases; but once let it pass the oven, and there is no potter on earth can do anything with it. It is most desirable and essential that we should have right ideas about the potter and the clay, for that image, by being mistaken in its purpose and scope, has wrought infinite mischief in the Church. There is a point up to which the potter can do what he pleases with the clay: he can make the vessel high or low, broad or narrow, shapely or ungainly; he can play with the wet clay. There was a time when the Lord could do this with man; when he took the dust out of the ground and shaped it, and prepared it for the reception of inspiration, he could have broken it, or re-shaped it, or done what he liked with it, but not after he had breathed into man the breath of life, and man became a living soul. Reverently, then, God conditioned and limited himself. The Lord cannot

convert the world without the world's consent. In Almightyness the Lord still reigneth in the fulness of his power. He can make the nations, and put them down; but what can he do with a little child's heart when that heart is set in deadly animosity against him? He could break the child upon the wheel, but breakage is not conversion, destruction is not reconciliation. How does he propose to proceed in this matter of bringing the world to himself? We find the answer in the music of the New Testament. What is there? Any hint of omnipotence? Not one. What is the tone of the New Testament? Reasoning, entreaty, persuasion. In it there is a Man who shall tell good news and ask men to believe it; and he must put upon all the eloquence this terrible climax, yet this climax full of graciousness—"He that believeth shall be saved: he that believeth not shall be damned." Everything depends, then, upon the state in which the potter's vessel is found. Once let it be hardened by fire, and the potter can do nothing with it, but save it, use it, or break it; it has passed out of his hands. There is a sense in which we pass out of the hands of the mere power of God. He can always destroy us. Omnipotence is always available for crushing; but in the matter of salvation there must be pleading, standing at the door and knocking, patient waiting, loving and tender appeal. Omnipotence must soften itself by its infinite lovingkindness, that the two may work together in zealous co-operation. A potter can only work with the clay whilst it is in a certain condition. We are not clay. When a man asks us in theological anger or impatience, Cannot the potter do what he likes with the clay? we answer, Yes, before it has gone through the oven, not after; and we answer, No, we are not clay, we are men, souls, thinkers, and it hath pleased God, with whom alone rests the thunder of Almightyness, so to make us that we can disobey him; otherwise we could not be men. We must take the risks of manhood with its advantages. Our dejection is great only because our exaltation is unequalled by any creatures known to ourselves. It is because we can blaspheme God that we can pray.

Jeremiah is to take a potter's earthen bottle for dramatic uses. He is to go forth, not personally, but officially: "Take of the

ancients of the people, and of the ancients of the priests; and go forth." Cruelly have these prophets been used, as if they intended all the harsh expressions they used. They had nothing to do with them; they were errand-bearers; they were sent with messages of thunder, and all they had to do was to deliver them. They themselves trembled under the very burden they carried. This will remove a great deal of the difficulty felt in relation to what are known as imprecatory psalms, oburgatory prophecies, cruel denunciations, and the like. The men were not scolds, furies, people who delighted in the use of violent language as a kind of rhetorical exercise; they were men who were charged with the judgments of God, and were bound to deliver them under pain of death. Men are sent on hard errands. The men do not like the business they have to do oftentimes. We could be so popular, say they, if we could but say just what we pleased out of our own imagination; and then we should offend no one, we should enjoy the hospitality of nations; we should prophesy smooth things, and make the lives of men comfortable; we should take the sting out of the law, and all darkness we should blow away from the heavens, that they might shine in beautiful blueness and radiance; then we should be sent for, and patronised, and compensated, and honoured, and mayhap might sit sometimes with the king on his throne that we might whisper into his ear more tenderly and intently sweet lies. A prophet's life was a hard one. What could it be to Isaiah, to Jeremiah, or to Ezekiel to talk this retributive thunder and lightning? Yet they could not be silent; the carriage was made for the gun, and the gun it must carry. The Lord has made men different. Some men could not read a prophecy aloud without taking out of it all that is distinctive of its intellectual energy and spiritual dignity. Such men would turn a denunciation into a kind of lying benediction. Others, again, could not read the Beatitudes as they ought to be read, with musical tremulousness, with tears, with infinite suggestiveness of tone, with sympathy that would not irritate a wound. Each man must operate according to his own gift and function. Here we come face to face with the sovereign election of God, and we accept it as a gracious truth. One man is made of iron, and another of finest porcelain, and another hardly made at all—simply blown into a

kind of trembling existence, more a figure, a wraith, a cloudy shape, than a solid personality. Each accepts his gift of God, and works accordingly, and thanks God for any measure of grace and power, and for any opportunity, how limited soever, of proclaiming the eternal kingdom of light and truth and grace.

We need some such introduction as this to the tremendous sentence which Jeremiah pronounced when he went unto the valley of the son of Hinnom, which is by the entry of the east gate. He was there to recite a lesson: "proclaim there the words that I shall tell thee," at the moment. How he must have writhed under the torture! How his lips must have been made again to speak this molten lava! How he must have lost consciousness in a certain way for a time, and have become a mere instrument or medium for the using of Almighty God! Man never conceived these supreme judgments; they bear an impress other than human. What an awful cataract of judgment—what complaining of neglect and forsakenness—what an exhibition of treachery, blasphemy, self-idolatry, and all shame! And what resources of retaliation—what mockery—what taunting! Thus: "And I will make void the counsel of Judah and Jerusalem in this place,"—a word in the Hebrew which corresponds to the sound of gurgling. "I will make void:" I will pour out as men pour water out of a bottle, and it gurgles its way out into the ditch; so I will make void the counsel of Judah and Jerusalem. A kind of subtle laughter as of mockery, a ghostly taunting, runs through this declaration. "Their carcasses will I give to be meat for the fowls of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth:" I will spread a banquet for birds and beasts of prey. "And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat every one the flesh of his friend in the siege and straitness." Jeremiah never invented these words; as a human invention they would be wholly out of proportion to the thing spoken about. Man can never take such a view of sin as can justify such judgments on a merely human scale. It is not in man's moral nature to see sin in its sinfulness, except in a very limited and suggestive degree. Only he who can see sin as it is—black, infamous—can fit the judgment to it. Therefore, in the judgment of God let us read the divine estimate of wrong



being and wrong doing. Yet we feel that history without this spirit of judgment would be intolerable. Imagine human history rolling forth in ever-increasing volume without the spirit of judgment having its days of criticism and audit and doom! The spirit of judgment has made the centuries what they are. But for the action of that spirit how the black river would have increased, and overflowed all the green fields and blooming gardens, and turned the whole earth into a black sea! But now and again the spirit of judgment has come down, set up a great white throne, sat upon it, and meted out penalty, and given fear its place in the ministry of Providence, and has thus held in limitation that which would have inundated and overwhelmed the whole green earth. Let us be thankful for death; let us bless God for plague and pestilence: they are the servants of the Almighty. Even when they come to avenge neglect of law, they do not divest themselves of religious suggestion. There have been men who have laughed almost atheistically because they have traced plague and pestilence to the neglect of sanitary law. But who made sanitary law? Whose law is it? Why was not nature so made that we could do just as we pleased? Is not man greater than any sanitary law? The answer is, No; sanitary law is a law of heaven as well as a law of earth, and plague and pestilence are the black wolves which God keeps to bite men who sin against sanitary law. We do not by merely using secular or scientific terms do away with the central and abiding principle of a religious judgment and a religious penalty.

What then happened? Jeremiah, having thus denounced the judgment of the Lord, took up the bottle and broke it in the sight of the men that went with him. Then he was to say: "Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaketh a potter's vessel, that cannot be made whole again." Sometimes we need graphic displays of God's meaning. We cannot understand abstract reasoning, we are lost in spiritual metaphysics; sometimes, therefore, God has to employ means for writing the lesson in very graphic letters before our eyes, and he must say as bottle and vessel are broken in the sight of the people—"THUS!" Why have we not ears to hear the noises which are made thus in penal providence?

Why do we not exercise our eyes and behold how many bottles are broken upon the floor of history, that men may be taught how God will act in certain moral crises? We call such exhibitions dramatic, theatrical, eccentric; still the prophets go forth and declare God's truth in God's way: long, elaborate, minute, critical, eloquent appeals and denunciations would have been lost, but the shivered bottle taught the observing people what God meant to do with them; they would be as a little bottle in his hand, as a thing that could be broken to pieces at their very feet. The Lord resorts to all manner of exhibition and illustration and appeal, if haply he may save some. This is the reason why he dashed your fortune to pieces. You remember when the sum was large, and you said you would die in your nest, how he took you up the bottle and broke it at your feet, and you started, and wondered as to what was coming next. It was thus that God broke the bottle of your little child's life; he saw that this was the only way in which your attention could be excited, for you were becoming imbruted and carnalised; you were losing all spiritual life and dignity and value, and were rapidly amalgamating yourself with the dust; therefore, he had to send infinite trouble before your eyes could be opened in wakeful and profitable attention. Thus the Lord is defeating crafty politicians, and selfish statesmen, and ambitious kings, and families that are bent on their ruin through their dignity: and thus, and thus, by a thousand breakages, God is asking man to think, ere it be too late.

Throughout this condemnation there is a spirit of justice. We never have mere vengeance in the providence of God, any more than we have mere power in the miracles of Christ. The miracles of judgment and the miracles of providence are all explained by a moral impulse or purpose. The Lord condescends to use the explanatory word, "Because." Thus we read: "Because they have forsaken me." A wondrous word, of frequent occurrence in the sacred books, is this word "forsaken." God feels it when we do not keep near him; he misses us; he cannot bear to be forsaken. Has he a heart? Has he sensitiveness in regard to creatures short-lived upon the earth, as ephemera are short-lived in the sunbeam? Can he not make more men to

keep him company? Are we of consequence to him? Why this divine wail because God has been left, neglected, forsaken? This is not the complaint of mere fastidiousness; this is the revelation of the divine nature. He condescends to cry that we may understand that he has a heart; he is willing to send upon the earth a shower of tears that we may know how capable he is of being grieved. There is, then, a spirit of justice in the whole condemnation. Verily, there is a reason or an explanation of all the judgment that falls upon our life. Why was the one ewe lamb taken? Because we had forsaken God. Why was our house ruined by the storm? Because we had estranged the sanctuary. Why was the whole business turned back upon us in disappointment and confusion? Because we had burned incense unto other gods. Why this long continuance of cloud, and frown, and difficulty, and humiliation? Dost thou ask, thou masked pretender? Dost thou ask in the tone of injury? Put thine hand within thy breast, now draw it out, and it is white with leprosy; put it back, it is more leprous still: the answer is within thee—the heart is set against God. It will be always difficult to make amiable persons understand this, because they have not strength enough to go many a mile in the devil's road; it is impossible, therefore, for them to believe that the devil's road is so long, and that other men can take a journey into a far country and there waste their substance with riotous living. You can account for your poisoned blood if you like. Do not make a mystery when you can solve the riddle. Do not ask men to pray with you until you have damned yourself. Why should we waste our prayers upon men who have covered up their iniquity, and then wanted us to plant the flowers of piety in the black soil? There is a reason behind all this; probably we cannot always understand that reason, because all judgment does not fall because there has been sin; sometimes judgment is sent to try men, that they may be baffled and disappointed and humbled; sometimes God says, I will inflict a loss upon Job in order that he may pray with tenderer pathos and larger scope of language and desire; I will teach the patriarch how to pray; at last I will make him pray for the very friends whom he has been contradicting all this time. Sometimes he makes us poor that he may make us rich. Every man, therefore, must judge

the case for himself; the one anxiety of the teacher should be that no man should lay flattering unction to his soul when he has no right to it; and on the other hand, the true teacher should see that no man is cast down of sorrow overmuch when he cannot trace the sin which accounts for the judgment; in that instant it may be that God is trying and testing and training, and all the while is looking over the furnace and watching until he can catch sight of his own image, then he will deliver and glorify those who have been purged and tested. This is a double question. The face on each side must be studied, and no man must pronounce for another, but let each be faithful to himself, or he never can receive explanation, condolence, or true sustenance. What looks like severity is really profoundly beneficent. This we have tested in many an instance. Man cannot always pronounce upon his trouble on the day of its occurrence; he needs the help of distance. Let a man look upon the first grave he ever dug a quarter of a century after he made that pit in the black ground. How awful it was on that day of digging! How near despair the man was when he took his first journey into the cemetery! But time came and wrought its wizardry in explanation and soothing sympathy; the horizon enlarged; events occurred which without being ostentatious were expository; things fell into their places; out of chaos came order, out of tumult came music, out of darkness came light; and now the way to the cemetery is almost a flowery way; there are joys to be had there not to be found elsewhere—not shouting, exulting joys, but those tender gladnesses which are charged with a deeper pathos because of the melancholy which throws upon them a hue as of heaven's own light. Experience alone can understand this. Such conclusions cannot be rushed to and violently forced; they must come as the result of a long educational process. We see here, however, the place of the prophet in society; he is a moral teacher, he speaks great spiritual truths; he is not an expositor of science and art, he is an expositor of the ways of God to men.

Jeremiah having delivered his message, what became of it all? “Pashur the son of Immer the priest, who was also chief governor in the house of the Lord, heard that Jeremiah prophesied these

things. Then Pashur smote Jeremiah the prophet" (xx. 1, 2). The word "smote" is grammatically peculiar. Within the grammar of it is held the meaning that the blow was struck with the priest's own hand. It was not a stroke delivered by another. So excited did Pashur the son of Immer the priest become, that he lifted up his hand and smote the prophet who had thus denounced the sin of the nation. Did Jeremiah retire dismayed? We find the answer from verse 3 to verse 6. Jeremiah was not overborne by this blow from the priest's hand; he said, "The Lord hath not called thy name Pashur, but Magor-missabib:" there shall no longer be joy round about, but fear round about; and the worst kind of fear, "for thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will make thee a terror to thyself." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God! Prophets must not accept a flesh wound as a period to their function, as an exhaustion of their prerogative; while the poor flesh smarts under the stinging blow the soul must rise to the occasion, and the smiter himself must be struck with a deadlier hand than his own. Thus the prophet has a bad time of it in the world. We pray that a prophet may arise. Yet who dare say Amen? He would have a hard time of it! We need him much. The Lord hath forsaken me utterly if at this moment the Church does not in all her departments and communions need a prophet, a terrible man, a man of iron lips, a man of throat of brass, a man too strong for patronage, yet weak in the presence of all tenderness, necessity, and helplessness. Let him come, O living God, with his potter's earthen vessel, and break it before us. Yet how dare we ask thee to send that man? We should ill-use him. Yet we need him very much.

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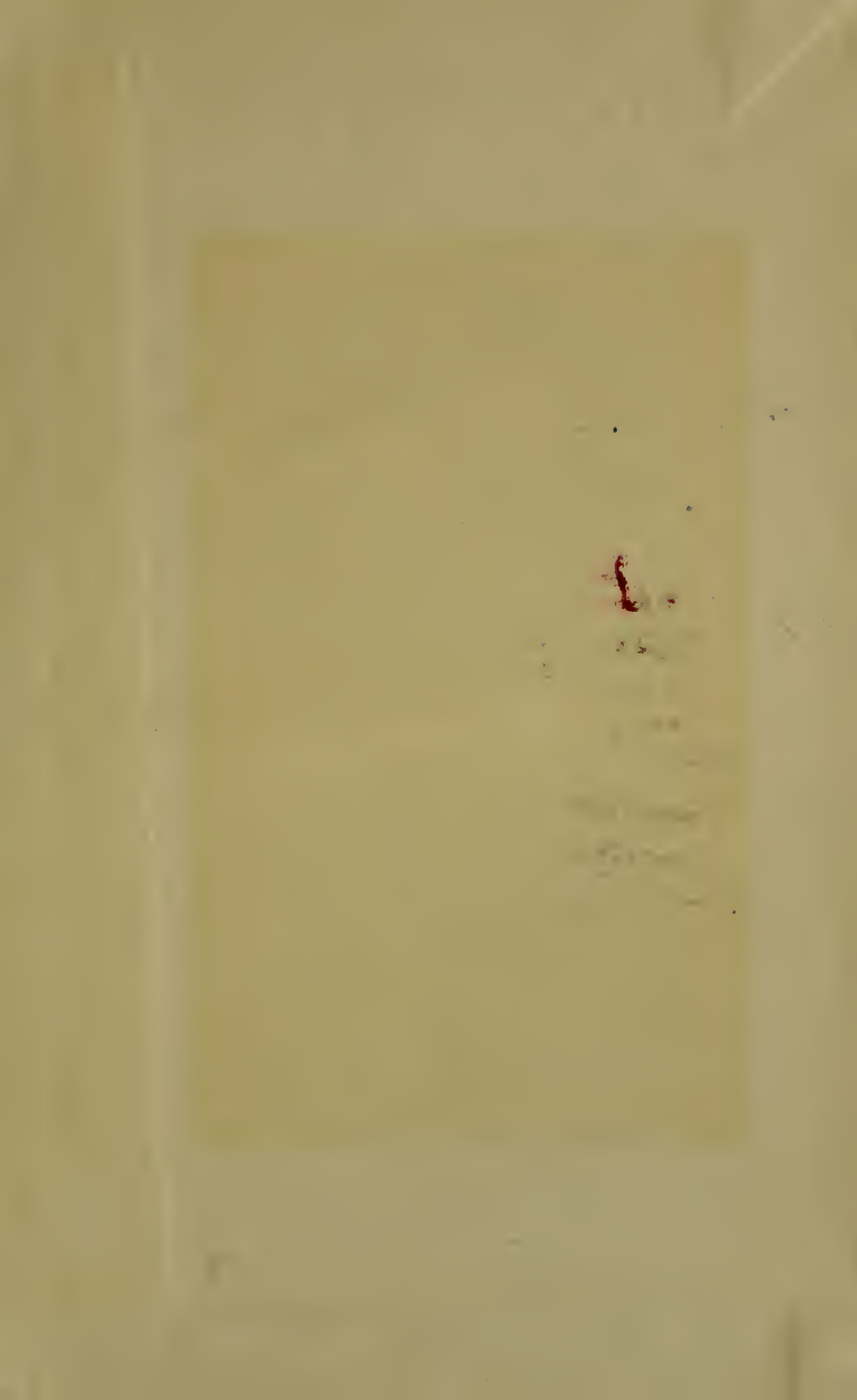




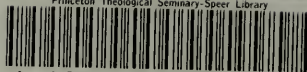








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